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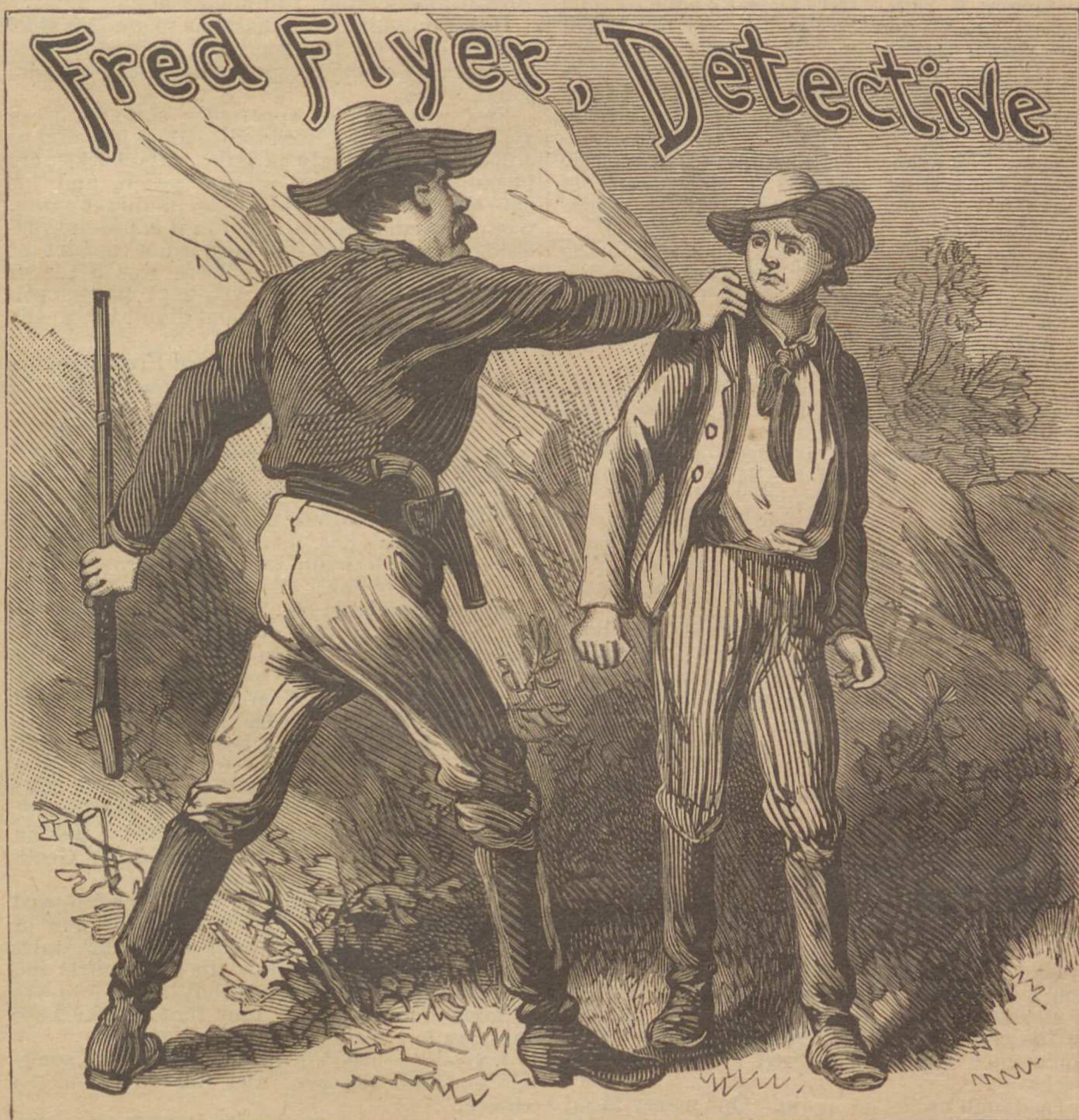
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FRED FOUND HIMSELF IN THE STRONG HANDS OF THE IRATE CONSTABLE, WHO GRASPED HIS COLLAR WITH A VIGOROUS CLUTCH.

Fred Flyer, Detective;

OR,

ABE BLIZZARD ON DECK.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "FRED HALYARD," "BOB ROCKET,"
"DETECTIVE DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FRED MAKES THE DUST FLY.

"THERE'S no use talking. It's the slowest old world that was ever launched, that's my notion. Why, a chap might as well be in the ark with daddy Noah, just floating round, and looking at it rain. Here's a week gone by, and not an item. I don't see what's ever to come of the *Star* if somebody don't murder somebody, or if somebody else don't bu'st into somebody else's bank, and flirt away a million or two of specie. There's no use being a reporter in times like these. A chap might as well be a ditch-digger. Not even a political dig-out, or a prize-fight. I'm getting ashamed of such a slow old world. Won't somebody cork me up in a bottle of lavender, and lay me away on a shelf?"

A loud burst of laughter broke out in the office of the *Morning Star*, as Fred Flyer, the youthful reporter, went through this diatribe, with a face a foot long, and an expression as if he had just been to the funeral of two of his uncles.

"Come, come, Fred," exclaimed Mr. Brace, the chief editor of the *Star*, "don't go into a decline over the lack of news. We'll try and keep the poor *Star* on its feet by giving the biography of the King of the Sandwich Islands. The paper is alive and kicking yet, I fancy."

"Not more than half alive," declared Fred. "It's lost all its spice, and a newspaper without spice is like mince-pie without raisins. Why the poor thing is so dull and drooping that I weep every time I read it."

"Then go into the business yourself, my boy. Knock down a policeman. Snatch some young lady's purse. Set fire to a barn. Steal a case of diamonds. Try any of those nice little amusements. We'll promise you a column a day. The *Star* shall blaze with your history. I'll double-lead the arrest and trial. We'll send a reporter every day to the prison, and tell the story of every bean in your daily pot of soup. Come, Fred, make a martyr of yourself for the good of the *Star*."

Fred shook his head gravely.

"It's a pretty game; but it's a bit too one-sided," he remarked very solemnly. "I calculate I'd do better as a law-maker than a law-breaker. Better send me to Congress. I bet you I keep you posted then in some neat ways of stealing without going to jail. Just put me on the track of the Congressmen, and see if I don't show the light-fingered folks some new tricks."

The laugh broke out again. One merry-faced editor wheeled around on his tall stool at the high desk, and called out:

"I tell you what it is, Fred, there is a neat opening just now for a young man of your size. Streak up-country to Potter county where all this jail-breaking fun is going on. There's eleven men got out of jail the other night. They are robbing stores and hen-roosts all over the county, and the citizens are getting up a Vigilance Committee to chase them into the mountains."

"Isn't it up that way that another chap is starving himself?" asked a second. "In prison for horse-stealing and hasn't eaten a mouthful for thirty days?"

"Just so. There's a chance there for Fred to distinguish himself."

"I'll do it!" exclaimed Fred, who had taken all this in with eager ears. "I'm your lad, for a cow and a plate of muffins! Why, that's just my style, to a hair, and I'm going for that Abe Blizzard heavy now, I promise you."

He sprung up in such haste as to send his stool rolling over on the floor, and danced an impromptu jig at the prospect of such a congenial job of work.

Fred was a boy of apparently some eighteen years of age, a tall, well-built lad, as graceful as a deer, and seemingly as agile. His cheeks were blooming as those of a ripe peach, and his eyes as black and sparkling as midnight stars, while his handsome face had in it a prompt decision which showed that he was not the sort of boy to be played with. There was a gleam of fun in it, too, as of one who kept an eye open for the bright side of life, and didn't know the meaning of the blues.

"I'm your donkey!" continued Fred, dancing more lively than ever. "I bet you I make the *Star* sparkle. There's some prime items afloat up there, and a chap like me ought to be salted down if he can't make more. You've got a level head, Mr. Prince. Queer I didn't think of it myself. Wager you high I'm off for old Potter before the sun goes down this blessed night. Strike while the item's hot; that's the reporter's motto. Pack me up a ream of paper, a gross of pens and a gallon of ink. Keep one side of the *Star* open for news from old Potter. Charter a telegraph line and a train of cars, for I'm going to make things spin. You might throw in a photograph gallery, so I can send you genuine pictures of the outlaws; then you needn't use that old picture that you've had in already for General Grant, Henry Ward Beecher and Guiteau. Good-by; I'm off! Put in my obituary with a piece of poetry, if I kick the bucket. A chap might as well play seven-up with a rattlesnake as try to come it over that Blizzard. He's an old coon, they say, but I'm a young coon. Good-by. Keep the *Star* spinning."

A louder burst of laughter than ever followed Fred, as he shot like a rocket out of the door of the editorial room, and went down the stairs taking three at a stride. His high spirits and liveliness were so infectious that he left a breeze of good humor behind him that sparkled the next day in the columns of the *Star*.

A touch of Fred's life and jollity had somehow got into the pens and ink-bottles of the editors.

It was not long afterward when Fred broke into his own home with a crash of the front

door, as if the house was about to fall from its foundations.

"Mercy on me! What's the matter?" exclaimed Mrs. Flyer, showing her motherly face anxiously at the door, while she brandished a toasting-fork in her right hand. "Has somebody backed a coal-cart into the front of the house?"

"No; it's only me, mother!" cried Fred. "I came in in a hurry, you see."

"Laws bless us, I should think so! You've got such a way of coming in in a hurry that it's a mercy there's any house left. And what's the matter now?"

"Dinner first," answered Fred with a gay laugh, as he pushed his mother back into the room with a loving kiss. "I want to fill up the provision-chest, for I may go some days without my dinner before the month is much older."

"What's up, Fred?" demanded the father, who was seated on a settee at one side of the room smoking a very long pipe. "Got marching orders, hey, boy?"

"The worst kind," answered Fred. "Got to streak up into the mountains, and smell out that band of Blizzards that's making things lively up-country. Items for the *Star*. That's the cake I'm going to bake."

"Bless you, my boy, isn't it dangerous?" asked his mother, anxiously.

"A trifle maybe, mother. But what's that to me? I'm used to that sort of thing, and I always come out right side up with care. You know that. You remember the time I crossed the river on the floating ice, and the time I was in a railroad bu'st up, and the time I jumped out of the fifth story of a burning house, and the time I fell down a mine, and the time—"

"Dry up there!" cried his father, vigorously. "You're too confounded risky. If you hadn't been made of india-rubber you'd been smashed to a pancake long ago."

"But I *am* made of india-rubber, so I ain't going to be smashed to a pancake. Don't fret. Fred's going to pull through all right. Stir up dinner, mother. Time's short. I've got to do some packing up, for I guess I'll want a clean shirt and stockings before I get back. Got to shoot down to the office again and get hold of some funds, and the train goes out at three, so there's no time left for snoozing."

Fred waited for no reply; but was off up-stairs like a squirrel. Hurrying into his own room, he seized his traveling sachel, and commenced to rifle his drawers as if he intended to take all his possessions with him. Shirts, stockings, coats, hats, shoes, all his extra clothes were piled in a heap in the middle of the floor, and the impulsive boy within five minutes had filled the sachel three times over, not knowing just what to take and what to leave. He had just emptied it out for the fourth filling when his mother called out from the foot of the stairs:

"Come down, Fred. Dinner's on the table."

"All right," answered Fred, stuffing something hastily into the sachel, and closing it. "I'll be down in a jiffy."

Down he came, almost at a bound. Dinner smoked on the table. His father, who had a

reputation for laziness, and managed to have more off days than on days, had laid aside his pipe, and drawn his chair to the table. Fred's two younger brothers, just come in from school, were surveying the viands with hungry eyes.

"Hallo, snippety jibbety!" exclaimed Fred.

"Got through with your A B C's, have you, and come in for pork and cabbage? Bet you can't tell me how many blue beans make five-and-forty."

"Hush that nonsense," cried Mr. Flyer, severely, "and come to your dinner."

Fred drew up to the table, with his brothers; but he had quite spoiled the appetite of the younger of these youthful scholars, who spent half of his dinner-time trying to cipher out with bits of bread the difficult problem which Fred had given him. Unfortunately he had no blue beans, or he might have got to the answer with less trouble.

"What have you put in your sachel, Fred?" asked his mother.

"Oh, I don't know. Plenty, you bet," and Fred spread another slice of bread with butter. "A little of everything. I ain't going short, nary time."

"Let me see," said his mother, who did not altogether trust her headlong boy.

She opened the sachel, and began to investigate its contents. But in a moment she dropped it, while her hands went up in a gesture of horror and despair.

"Mercy on us! was there ever such a boy? One stocking, six collars, a torn handkerchief, and a dusting rag, and he's going traveling! And what's this? Bless me, if it isn't that night-cap of mine, that I lost six weeks ago! Just look there, Jacob. That's our Fred's notion of going a traveling."

"Oh, let the boy alone. Last time he got in nothing but a pair of old shoes and a match-box," growled Mr. Flyer.

"But you called me down to dinner," explained Fred, a little abashed. "I hadn't time to get through."

"I suppose not," answered his mother dryly. "You go on with your dinner, Fred. I'll pack your sachel for you while you finish. I hardly think you are to be trusted."

The careful mother made her way to Fred's room. But she stopped in utter dismay when she got her eyes on the floor of that apartment. It looked as if there had been an earthquake in the room, and as if the contents of bureau and closet had been shaken into a heap in the middle of the floor.

"And he was up here only five minutes!" she exclaimed. "If he'd had an hour, I wonder what sort of a mess he would have made? Couldn't have been much worse than this, though."

But it is surprising how soon a careful house-keeper can bring order out of confusion. She was no longer than Fred had been, but in that time she had filled his sachel with the necessities for a journey, and replaced the remaining things in their appropriate quarters.

"Here it is, Fred," she remarked, handing it to him with a severe look. "And I must say—"

"Now, mother, don't mind. I'll fix the room up when I come home," broke in Fred. "I

never could do things neat in a hurry. Kiss me good-by, mother. I'll write to you to-morrow. And you can find all about what I am doing in the *Star*. Good-by, dad. Take care of yourself, Tommy. Good-by, snippity jibbity. Mind your eye sharp, little fellow."

"Say, Fred," exclaimed the young gentleman thus addressed.

"Well, snippy, what is it?"

"How many blue beans does make five-and-forty? I've jist been cipherin' all dinner, and I can't tell."

"Ask your teacher. He'll tell you. I haven't time," laughed Fred. "Good-by, all. Take care of yourselves. Keep an eye on the *Star*, and you'll know what I'm about. I'm going to stir up some fun now, just you see."

He snatched his sachel, and darted away. In an hour from that time Fred was stepping into a car of a west-bound train, off for old Potter, and items for the *Star*.

CHAPTER II.

A DARK MEETING.

INTO the neat little town of Oxford, Potter county, landed Fred Flyer after dark of a chill evening. It was a pretty little place, that lay like an egg in a nest of the mountains. Some of its streets ran at a steep slant on the flanks of the hills, while a mountain of considerable height sloped to within a mile of the town.

It was pitch dark. There were here no gas-lamps nor rows of electric lights, while not a star was visible in the sky. The young traveler had asked his way at the station, but it was not long before he found himself all astray.

"Bless me, if I don't think I'm climbing up-hill!" he at length declared. "Wonder if I'm lost? Where are all the folks that live about here, anyway? The town is as empty as a miser's meal-bag."

It was just then the supper hour of the good people of the town, and the streets were deserted in consequence, while all the lights of the houses were in the kitchen quarter of the habitations. Fred wandered on, growing more confused at every minute. He stopped at length, and flung his sachel on his shoulder.

"Well!" he ejaculated, "it's my private notion that this thing is about played out. Don't like to disturb folks at their grub, but you can bet I ain't going to stumble round here mach longer, like a rabbit in a potato-patch. Guess I'll rap somebody up from the supper-table, and ask for a pilot."

He looked around him. To his surprise all the houses were behind him. He had made his way on to the hillside out of the town.

"A chap might think I was on a tramp," he growled, in a discontented tone. "Best port my helm, and sail back on the larboard tack. Don't want to snooze to-night on the nose of the mountain."

"Hold your level, my hearty," came a hoarse voice from the darkness. "Jist nail yerself thar, if you don't want to see brimstone and blazes."

"Hillo!" cried Fred. "What's this?"

"Guess you'll find out, if you kick up any didoes."

A dark form made its appearance, vaguely

outlined in the gloom. The features of a whiskered face were just visible. But what Fred particularly noted was a hand grasping a revolver, which was uncomfortably close to his head.

"Now keep yer level, youngster," continued the speaker. "I only want to have a sociable confab with you. Reckon as how, from somethin' you let drap, ye're a stranger in these diggin's?"

"Then just suppose you wait for an introduction before you get so mighty well acquainted," grumbled Fred.

The stranger laughed, but he kept his weapon almost in contact with Fred's ear. It was evident he meant business.

"What fatches you hereaways?" he sternly asked.

"Come up after newspaper items," answered Fred, coolly. "I'm a reporter, old fellow. Going to look a little into this jail-breaking business, and try and pick up Abe Blizzard's biography."

"Ho! ho!" laughed the ruffian. "Arter old Abe, hey? Want items, do you? Wal, I reckon you've got one to start on. See here, my chap, I ain't going to hurt you, and I won't go through you if you jump squar'. But if you kick up any didoes I'll send you to Davy Jones quicker'n a cat's wink. D'ye take that?"

"Take it for blow," answered Fred, boldly. "I don't scare easy; so you may as well stop bluster and come to business."

"Look here, you young game-cock."

He struck a match, which for an instant illuminated his face, and then was quickly extinguished. It was a harsh, stern, determined face, sun-bronzed, and full of dark lines of resolution. The eyes glared out from deep, overhanging brows.

"Think you'd know me ag'in?"

"Reckon so."

"Well, I'm Abe Blizzard!"

Fred started. Was it possible that he had already, not ten minutes in the town, fallen afoul of the noted convict? And what was bringing the hunted robber to the very threshold of his enemies?

"Don't jump outer your skin, young feller. The devil ain't never so black as he's painted. Now, see here, I want a few words with you."

"Pile in!" answered Fred. "But just take down that bit of hardware. I've seen it. You needn't keep showing it."

The outlaw laughed again, as if Fred's coolness amused him. But he lowered his pistol.

"You're a reporter arter items," he began. "Well, here's an item for you. Abe Blizzard got outer jail. Reckon he'd been a jackass if he hadn't. But you mought think I was a cow in a clover-field, the way they're chashin' me round. Now that's played out, an' I'm goin' to make Rome howl if it ain't stopped."

"But they say that you don't let up. You keep robbing stores and houses all over the country."

"It's a lie!" roared the outlaw. "Ther ain't an old hen snatched from a roost in the county but they lay it on me. Ther's a lot o' scall-wags at work, and Abe Blizzard is got to father it all. Now I want you to tell 'em this from

me:—If they don't let up, and stop chasin' me in the mountings, I'll giv 'em a bit o' my quality. Do you hear me?"

"Calculate so," answered Fred, as quietly as if this was an ordinary conversation.

"There's a judge in this here town. Judge Allen, they call him. That's the coon that's rakin' up the coals on me. Now, see here. You've got some money?"

"I ain't quite dead broke."

"Jist do what I want, and you kin keep it. There's a bit of warnin' here which I want handed to Judge Allen. If he takes it, all's hunky. If he don't, I'm goin' to touch him in a sore spot. You take?"

"You bet!"

"Hang me, if I don't like you, boy! You've got a tech o' sperit, sure. Won't you shake hands?"

"No. Not with a man of your record," and Fred drew himself up proudly.

An oath came from the outlaw's lips, while his brows frowned ominously.

"If a man'd said that to me I'd ha' knocked him kickin'. Ye're a-playin' with gunpowder, little man, now I tell you. Here. Take this. Put it into Judge Allen's hands. And tell him all I've said."

He thrust a folded paper into Fred's hand.

"And the next time Abe Blizzard asks to shake hands with you, you'll do it, or there'll be ructions. Mind your eye, my hearty."

He vanished almost as he spoke. He disappeared so suddenly that he seemed to have melted into the night. Fred stood holding the note that had been given him, and looking into the empty gloom. For the moment he hardly knew if this had been dream or reality. It seemed as if some phantom had come from the night, and vanished into it again. All around was silence and darkness. But he felt the note between his fingers in assurance of its reality. Fred shook himself as if just awakening from a sleep.

"If this isn't a prime start, I'll sell out," he declared. "Why, the job's just flumping into my hands. Got an item already, and I can see plenty of fun in the wind. That coon ain't going to be snatched like a hen off a roost. He'll make things lively before they take him. Well, it's my job now to streak for that hotel, get my supper, and then hunt up Judge Allen."

He turned back toward the town, whose lights lay immediately behind him. A few steps brought him once more within the range of the houses.

"Don't think I'll go flopping around loose any longer," Fred soliloquized. "Guess I'll stir up some of these good folks, and find out just where the hotel is. Won't pay to sail around all night in the dark like a cow in the prairie."

Before him, as he spoke, rose a handsome house, surrounded by a broad stretch of well-adorned grounds. To the door of this he walked up, and rung the bell. It was all one to Fred whether it was the residence of the mayor of the town, or of one of its humblest citizens. He was not the lad to hold back for want of cheek.

After a minute the door opened. A light

hung in the vestibule, so that the person who had opened the door was clearly revealed. It was a young lady, the first glance at whom gave Fred an odd sensation. He was sure he had never seen anybody quite so pretty and engaging in his life before.

She was of small figure, dressed in light-blue silk, and with a face that danced with animation, while it bloomed like an apple-blossom in the warm lamplight that fell upon it.

Fred hesitated and stammered a little as this apparition stood waiting to hear from him.

"Excuse me for disturbing you," he at length said. "I am a stranger in this town, and have lost my way to the hotel. If you can only tell me how to find it—"

"The hotel? Why, certainly. I did not think anybody could miss it in this handbox of a town." Her voice was full of music and amusement. "You have only to follow this street a short distance, and it will bring you into the main street. Then turn to your left, and ten steps will bring you to the hotel."

"Thanks," answered Fred. "I tried that before. But it was so dreadful dark that I got all twisted up."

"Shall I send some one with you?"

"Oh, no! I beg not. I am ever so much obliged." Fred was running round in his mind for some excuse to keep up the conversation. The young lady stood holding the door as if quite ready to dismiss him.

"By the way," he continued, as a thought struck him. "I hope you will excuse me for troubling you, but as you have been so kind can you inform me where I will find the residence of Judge Allen? I have some business with him."

"Judge Allen?" she exclaimed, while her eyes lighted up with surprise. "Why, he lives here. Judge Allen is my father."

It was Fred's turn to be surprised.

"Well, that is strange," he declared. "To think of my hitting upon his house at the very first asking! Is he in?"

"Come in, sir, and I will see," invited the young lady, whose eyes had been admiring Fred's face quite as much as he admired hers.

He lost no time in obeying the invitation, and seated himself in the hall, while she went back into the house. She returned after a minute, in her pretty, impulsive way.

"I am so sorry," she declared, "but father is not in. I think you will find him at the hotel. They meet there every night to talk over this dreadful affair of the robbers in the mountains. You've heard of them?"

"Oh, yes!" answered Fred. "Terrible fellows they seem to be."

"I do so hope they will be caught. They keep me awake at night thinking of them."

"I suppose I will not be able to sleep either," rejoined Fred, though the cunning fellow well knew that a ten-pounder tied to his ear would not keep him awake.

"Isn't it too dreadful for anything? They are robbing all around."

"It is just terrible."

"But sometimes I can't help wishing that Blizzard will get away. He is so brave and bold. And there's something so romantic about his doings."

"I hope he will, if you do," replied Fred.

She looked into Fred's serious face for a moment, while an amused look gathered around her lips. It ended by her breaking into a merry laugh.

"So you are ready to dance to any tune I play!" she exclaimed. "I think you had better go on to the hotel, sir."

"I will dance to that tune also," answered Fred, returning her laugh. Those few minutes had made them better acquainted than hours of formal intercourse. "I am ever so much obliged. Good-night."

"Good-night!"

The door stood open as he went down the street, the light serving to guide his way. A few minutes brought him to the main street, and into easy view of the lights of the hotel.

Fred's first duty now was to get a good wash after his journey, and to do justice to the appetizing supper which was quickly prepared for him. These necessary duties completed, he strolled into the tap-room of the hotel, where he found a group of the more solid people of the town, engaged in an earnest conversation. They looked at him questioningly as he entered.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but is Judge Allen present?"

"Yes," answered a stout, handsome gentleman. "I am he. Do you wish to see me?"

"I have been given a note, which I was to deliver into your hands," replied Fred. "I think you will find it important."

Judge Allen received the note with a look of surprise, tore it open, and quickly ran his eye over its contents. He had hardly done so ere he sprung to his feet, with a very red face and a look of deep indignation.

"By Heaven!" he cried, "we shall see! Do your worst, outlaw! But I will hunt you to the death!"

CHAPTER III.

OUT ON A MOUNTAIN HUNT.

"THER's no use talkin', Jedge Allen, but ther's got to be a squar' back-down somewhar. I've got it in my wool ag'in' you. You sent me to jail with out no evidence whatsoever. You've been a-huntin' me ever since I got out, jest as if I was a catamount. You're a-blamin' me fur things sich as I never thought o' doin'. Now you hear me, this thing's got to stop. You let me alone and I'll let you alone. But jest you keep on huntin' me, and I'll tech you sore. I'll make you howl. I ain't no baby, Jedge Allen. I'm a quiet chap, as don't want to trouble nobody. I won't tech hair nor hide in this county if you drop yer hunt. But if you keep it up, look out for squalls. I'll make you squirm like a nipped rat. That's my signatoor. ABEL BLIZZARD."

Judge Allen stood erect, reading this precious document to his comrades in the bar-room of the hotel, while his stern blue eyes blazed with indignation and energy.

"There it is, gentlemen. What do you think of it?"

"I'd back down if it was me," answered a portly, easy-going fellow. "There's no telling what that chap might do if he's cornered too close. When a rat shows his teeth it's best to give him some play."

"He might burn your house, or steal your horses," suggested another.

"Or attack you in the dark."

"He might do a good many things," answered the judge, with a curling lip. "What do you say, Branson?"

The person addressed was a slender, wiry individual, with a dry, wrinkled face, and dressed in a half-hunting garb.

"No use whatever fur you to go in the pickle, jedge. Let the rest on us keep up the chase. We'll fetch up the rascal."

"That's very wise, cautious advice," answered the judge, angrily, throwing himself into his chair. "There is only one weak spot in it. It is given to the wrong party. I am going to lead the hunt against this outlaw till I capture him, no matter for all his threats. He shall find that he is not playing with a child."

The judge fumed and fretted with indignation. It was evident that the outlaw's letter had sorely touched his pride.

He turned suddenly to Fred, who had seated himself, and was listening with interest to the conversation.

"How did you get this letter, sir?" he asked sharply, eying Fred with doubt and suspicion.

"Got it from Abe Blizzard," answered Fred, easily, as he settled himself into a more comfortable position.

"From Abe Blizzard!"

The exclamation was general. Several persons sprung to their feet in surprise.

"Just so. By mountain post. Came straight as a rifle-bullet."

"What do you mean?" cried the judge sternly. "Who are you?"

"Excuse me, judge," rejoined Fred, coolly. "I'm only a boy, you see; but I always take the world as it comes. I only landed in your town an hour or so back. Got sort of mixed up in my geography in coming to the hotel, and strayed on to the high grounds back. It was dark as seven thunders, but there was light enough to see a hand and a revolver, and to hear a voice."

"Abe Blizzard!" broke out one of the company, in an excited tone.

"That's what the chap called himself. He's a very badly treated individual, so he said. The people around here don't seem to appreciate his virtues. He wants to be let alone. If he's hunted any longer he's going to make Rome howl. I tell you, gentlemen, I had a very interesting conversation with that hand and revolver. And I took the advice of that voice, not to stir till he got through."

"Gracious me!" exclaimed the excited person. "Is it possible the bold ruffian has been so near us? Why, he might murder us all in our beds, and nobody be the wiser!"

"Oh, he's as amiable as a pig in a turnip-bed," continued Fred. "Wouldn't even take my purse, if I'd be kind enough to carry that note to Judge Allen. You never saw such a soft-hearted cut-throat."

The townsmen looked with some surprise at the easy-toned youth, as he described his adventure with a careless drawl. They were curious to know who he was, and what was his business in Oxford, but no one ventured to directly ask him the question.

Judge Allen sat with his chin on his hand,

and his eyes fixed on Fred with a scrutinizing glance. His face worked as if he was quietly communing with himself.

"So it seems you have had the pleasure of a private interview with the famous runaway," he remarked somewhat sarcastically to Fred. "Since you have been so fortunate, will you be kind enough to give me your opinion? What would you do if you were in my place?"

"Do you want it square and fair?" asked Fred.

"Square and fair."

"Then I'd never be choked off by a threat. If I thought it my duty to run him down, I'd run him down, and let him do his worst. But I am only speaking for myself, judge. I don't want to sail your boat. The fellow means mischief, and if you push the hunt on him there may be trouble ahead. I am only a boy, and don't pretend to have a man's judgment, so you had best take the advice of wiser persons."

"Never!" cried the judge, springing up and warmly seizing Fred's hand. "Your opinion is my own, my lad. I am going to lead a party into the mountains to-morrow, in pursuit of the fugitives. You may join us if you will."

"You couldn't hit my notion better if you'd offer me a brick house and a pigeon roost," answered Fred, as he returned the judge's pressure. "I want to see your famous outlaw by daylight. And I'm like you, judge. I'm only a boy, but I've got a touch of grit in my bones."

"To-morrow be it, then. You hear, gentlemen? The meet will be at the foot of Camel's Back. That's where the villains are in hiding. But they won't have much chance to escape to the neighboring peaks, for the whole country will be up and after them. I have just received a messenger from above. Harry Trueman's store was robbed last night, and the farmers are in arms for a raid. If we do our work well, we will have them all safe in jail again before the sun sinks to-morrow night."

A long conference succeeded, in which the details of the next day's work were fully debated and each one's duty laid down. Fred left them still talking, and retired to his room. He had work before him ere he could retire to rest. He had to write out an account of his evening's adventure, to be ready for the next day's early mail, as an item for the *Star*.

When the young reporter raised his curtain the next morning and looked out on the scene before his window, he saw a pretty, well-shaded country town, lying in the lap of a beautiful valley and under the beams of a crisp, frosty, October sun.

All was clear and clean, and the far-off peaks were brought so near in the transparent mountain air that they seemed but a short walk distant.

It was ten o'clock when he met the scouting-party, who were gathered just outside the town in readiness for the day's hunt. They were all armed, mainly with rifles. Judge Allen was with them, stern and determined.

"How is this thing to be managed, Branson?" he asked the wrinkled-faced hunter. "You're an old hand in the mountains."

"Fu'st thing," drawled Branson, leaning on his rifle while he scratched his thin hair—"fu'st

thing's to 'p'int a ginerel, and next thing's to 'p'int a boss."

"A general and a boss? That's a queer conglomeration."

"Look here, jedge. I ain't used to handlin' this sort o' a gang. S'pose you set up fur ginerel, and gi'n 'em Hail Columby if they don't toe the scratch."

"And who is to be boss?"

"Calk'late I'll take on that little job. You don't know no more 'bout the mount'ings nor a cat 'bout apple-parin's. I want you to boss this caboodle, and I'll boss you, and we'll sail up-hill lovely."

"Very good," laughed the judge. "I fancy you are right, Branson."

"Most allers am," drawled the hunter. "Now look here. Ther's a white spot 'way up yander on the nose o' the old camel. That's where we're to streak fur. And we've got to split into three squads, so's we kin scour the hill up to that pass. I'll take the center. Here's Joe and Bill Hall, old mounting coons, as kin lead the flanks—Hillo, young sprout! On hand, eh? Got any weepens?"

"Got a revolver," answered Fred.

"Then don't go practicin' on jay birds. Streak up, gentlemen. Guv' 'em the'r orders, jedge."

Their journey soon proved no easy one. A mile or two brought them from green fields into rocky slopes, where huge boulders and fallen trees made the path anything but easy.

"Go keerful, gentlemen," warned Branson. "It's a trifle rough hereaways, but it gits smoother a bit on. Howsomever, we ain't fetched up to the real diffikilties yet, and I'd 'vise ye to save yer wind fur the mounting chmbin' ahead."

"Save our wind!" cried the portly, ease loving individual of whom we have already spoken. "Lord! is this what you call fun?"

His observation was suddenly cut short by a tumble over a concealed log, that brought his nose into sudden contact with the rocky ground.

A laugh followed from his nearest neighbor, but the laughter quickly came to grief. He stumbled into a hidden hollow, and to save himself dropped his rifle, which exploded with a sharp report, the bullet whistling uncomfortably close to Branson's ear.

"Who in the blue blazes is that?" yelled the guide in a fury. "What infernal, thick-headed, slim-witted son of a gun is flinging his bullets around loose here? If I don't smash that shoat's snout, then—"

"It was all a mistake," explained the unlucky man hastily. "The piece dropped and went off of itself."

"Then I'd advise you to go off of yourself," broke out the irate hunter. "I think you'd find better quarters in the bosom of your family, than out huntin' outlaws on the mountings. We was doin' this on the sly, and blast me if you haven't guv the alarm five miles ahead! Push on, gentlemen. I'm mad. I'd kick myself if I wasn't."

This energetic reproof prevented any more wild rifle-shooting. The ground beyond grew more practicable. After half a mile of this difficult belt they reached a plateau, thickly

covered with woodland, and stretching for a mile almost at a level.

"Make the most of this smooth sailing," said Branson, dryly. "T'other side of it you're goin' to have a breezer. You ain't done no mountin' climbing yet, but you've got it afore you hot and heavy. Any chap that's got soft bones had best turn and toddle back."

It soon proved as he had said. The level ground came suddenly to an end. Before them rose a steep hill that looked almost perpendicular. The portly gentleman gazed at it in despair.

"Have we got to go up that?" he groaned.

"You kin take t'other bull by the horns, if you like," answered the guide, dryly. "If you've got a feather-bed at home, mebber you'd best make fur it, 'cause you won't find these rocks no feathers. Any chap as wants to climb Camel's Back has got to mount that slope. Guess 'tain't as bad as it looks, though. Push on lively, folks."

It was, indeed, a hard climb. There was no trace of a path. A series of huge rocks, which it was necessary to scale, closed the way, and the less agile of the party had to be dragged up, many of them by main force. Fred's youthful agility stood him in good stead here, and he made his way upward with an ease that brought a grim growl of approval from the guide.

"You've the makin' of a mountaineer, young 'un," he remarked. "But don't be too spry, or you mought step inter a hornets' nest afore we're by to whip 'em off. Give me yer hand, jedge. That's a rough bit o' rock."

"Rather," gasped the judge, as he was helped up a smooth rock eight feet high. "You must have a fly's feet, Branson, and hang on by suction."

"Guess so," was the short answer.

A half-hour of this difficult ascent brought them to the white spot which the guide had pointed out. It proved to be a great mass of quartz rock, standing, clear of trees, on the mountain's flank. One of the two other divisions of the party had got there before them. The remaining division quickly appeared. So far the coast was clear. No trace of the fugitive prisoners had been seen.

"Didn't expect to stir 'em up yit," remarked Branson. "But they mought be in that bit o' ground ahead of us."

He pointed upward. The mountain continued to slope rapidly, and some hundred feet above their heads loomed a perpendicular rock, whose bluff summit formed a long lookout over the valley below.

Suddenly, before their up-turned eyes, on the very brink of this precipitous cliff, appeared the figure of a man, tall and imposing. He was dressed in the costume of a hunter, and his face at that distance looked dark, stern, and threatening. A deep oath came from the lips of the guide.

"Abe Blizzard, by all that's lovely!" he ejaculated.

"Jist so, Elick Branson," came back, in stern accents. "Here I am. Come and take me. But if ye're a wise man, ye'll lead that crowd of water-babies home ag'in, while the'r skin's whole."

"Surrender!" cried Judge Allen, in a loud voice. "Surrender, you villain! We will have you, dead or alive!"

"So it's you, jedge? That's what I'm here to see. I've guv you warnin', and it's this way you take it. It's war to the knife, then, is it?"

"Yes, or to the bullet, if you will. I have sworn to capture you, and I will never rest till I have done so."

"That's plain talk, jedge. I told you I'd pinch you if you kept it up. So mind yer eye. You won't find Abe Blizzard no slouch. Here I am. Come and take me."

He stood defiantly erect on the brow of the cliff. There came the report of a rifle from one of the party below. A bullet sung wildly through the air. With a threatening movement of his hand the daring outlaw stepped back from his exposed position, and in a moment was lost to view.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHASE UP THE MOUNTAIN FLANK.

"ON, lads! On, my boys! We have him now! We are ten to his one, and he cannot escape us!" cried Judge Allen enthusiastically, as he pressed forward toward the upward ridge.

"Hold yer level, jedge," replied Elick Branson, in a tone of sarcasm. "Strikes this coon as it's 'bout the thing jist now to hold a council o' war. Tell you one thing, if you buy Abe Blizzard for a fool you mought as well have yer money inter a pig-sty."

"What do you mean?" asked the judge shortly.

"I mean in the fu'st place he'd never 'a' showed hisself thar only he's got a clear track behind him. In the second place we're nary ten to his one. There were eleven on 'em got outer jail, and I reckon the hull crowd's afore us. I don't want to pile cold water on yer game, jedge, but there's sich a thing as lookin' afore you leap."

The judge repressed himself with an effort. There was a red spot of anger in his face.

"What have you in view, Elick?" he at length calmly asked. "We have not marched to the top of the hill to turn and march down again."

"This is my idea," answered Elick calmly. He seated himself on a bowlder, and rested his chin on the lock of his rifle. "Jest at this minute thar's five hundred men climbin' the mountains, for ten mile fore and aft. The'r' wastin' the'r time, too, 'cause the runaways are afore us. Now if we push on blind we'll only drive 'em into some other hidin' place. It's my idea to fotch up the parties from Pilot and Old Tom, yere, to the right and left. Let them stretch out and close in t'other side o' Camel's Back. When they git in posish we'll push for'ard, and all close in together. That's what I call gittin' our fish in a seine net. They can't escape if we manage it judgmatical."

"A very neat thought!" exclaimed the judge ardently. "But how is it to be done? The parties you speak of are five miles away."

"I never strike a spark till I've got my tinder ready," answered Elick, sturdily. "Here's the Hall boys, old mountaineers, as knows the hills like a book. They'll cover the distance in an

hour and a half. A couple of hours more will bring the fellers into posish. Then all we want is a signal that the hunt's on, and everybody can push for'ard."

"A good scheme! A very good scheme!" answered the judge, approvingly. "I fancy the gentlemen won't object to a few hours' rest after their hard work. But cannot the outlaws turn our flanks and get into the mountain behind us?"

"They mought if they was eagles or swallers. Can't do it without wings. We've got hold of the only pass. See here, lads. Bill Hall, you streak out to Pilot Peak. Tom, you shoot off to yer namesake, Old Tom. You've caught my idear, I s'pose?"

"Yes," answered the two scouts, a pair of slender, wiry, keen-eyed fellows.

"Get your men in posish as rapid as you kin. Let the signal be a brush-blaze on the hill-flank. The minute we see it flash everybody's to push for'ard and close in. Then hey fur the run-away game. They'll want wings to git through the line of hunters. Off with you now; and be spry."

The two scouts stopped only to tighten their belts, set their foxskin caps firmly on their heads, and bring their rifles to a trail. Then they dashed off like hounds on an open scent, making nothing of the steepness of the pass which had been ascended with such difficulty.

Elick looked after them approvingly, and then turned and keenly surveyed the mountain before him.

"Guess you mought all flunk down and take a rest, gents," he declared. "Them lads is as spry as deer. Ther' won't be no grass grow under their feet. But it'll take three hours at the shortest to bring the boys up."

"And meanwhile what may become of the outlaws?" asked the judge, doubtfully. "Our halt will look suspicious. They may take the hint and escape."

"Where?" asked Elick, grimly. "They don't dare take to the open, t'other side the mountings. They'd be nabbed there, sure. If they strike right or left they'll meet the parties comin' up. It's my notion we've got 'em in a fox-trap."

"Yet it's not safe to let them think we've given up the chase," persisted the judge. "They are not fools, as you acknowledge. They may find means to break through the meshes of your net."

"I'll settle that," answered Elick. "I'm goin' for'ard on a scout. You see that hill above there, with the blasted pine on its snout?"

"Yes," answered the judge, looking up to a cliff several hundred feet higher.

"When you see a flash start up at the foot of that pine, take that for the signal, and push boldly up. I've got to go up there to catch the Hall boys' blaze. And meanwhile I'll scout the runaways."

With these words he started up the rocky and difficult slope before him, and in a few minutes was lost to view.

The party left behind prepared in various ways for the long rest before them. The most of them seemed quite ready for it, Judge Allen being nearly the only one who showed any

signs of impatience. Some stretched themselves on the smoothest rock they could find. Others wandered vacantly about, or seated themselves in conversation. One party produced a pack of well-thumbed cards, drew up some seats around a smooth-topped boulder, and soon a game of eucher was in busy operation.

This easy way of hunting outlaws was not quite satisfactory to the young reporter. He had ascended the mountain to this point with a warm enthusiasm native to his young blood. There was adventure in the wind, and for that he was ripe. This check to the pursuit, and the prospect of three or four hours' enforced rest, were a feature of the fun he did not quite relish. He had not yet begun to be tired, and wandered around like a caged animal, eager to be on the hunt.

"This isn't the way to pick up items," growled Fred, discontentedly. "You must go for them if you want them. Waiting for them isn't worth shucks. I've got the *Morning Star* on my shoulders, and I've got to keep up the reputation of that paper."

His uneasy roaming soon took him out of sight of the party, around some protruding rocks. Before him lay the mountain-side, at a gentler slope than where Elick Branson had ascended.

Fred looked at it askance for a moment. The temptation was too strong to be resisted.

"What's to hinder me going on a scout, too?" he muttered. "That old hunter understands the business better, I allow; but I'm not quite a baby. I've a notion I can give a good account of myself. Anyhow, I'd like to interview Abe Blizzard by daylight, to see if he's any better looking than he is in the dark. He got the ring in my nose then. Maybe I can get it in his snout next time."

The opportunity was too tempting to be resisted by the ardent youth. He looked around him to see if he was observed, and then sprang hastily up the rocky slope. In a few minutes he was lost to sight in a screen of bushes that grew thickly on a soil-covered level.

He quickly found, however, that blind mountain-climbing is no child's play. The way before him soon grew difficult. Here he had to clamber over a protruding mass of rock; there to make his way up a narrow and rugged slope; and again to ascend over a shelving place covered with loose, small stones, that gave way at every step beneath his feet. Here a steep ravine tore a passage through the rocks; yonder opened a yawning cavity which it took a perilous leap to cross. A dozen times he slipped and only saved himself by a hasty clutch at some rock corner. At length, thoroughly weary, he gained a shelf several hundred feet above his starting-point, where he flung himself down to rest after his vigorous climb.

"Somehow, I guess Old Elick's right," he declared. "It's glorious to be a pioneer, but it's lucky for the rest of the party that they didn't have to follow me. There would have been some funerals."

Fred lay for a half-hour ere he had thoroughly recovered his wind. He then resumed his ascent by a path not quite so difficult as that he had followed. A broad ravine, smoothed some-

what by winter torrents, offered an easier road up the mountain-side.

Meanwhile the resting party below continued to pass away the time as agreeably as possible. The card-party indeed seemed quite content to gamble away the outlaws, and showed no eagerness to pursue them.

"Right bower on your ace, and the game's mine," exclaimed one at length, as he slapped down his card. "That wins me Caleb Strong's old clothes, and Ike Marvel's left eye."

"All right. I've won the whole of Abe Blizzard. I won't put him up against less than two whole men, and both ears of another."

The laugh that followed this declaration was checked by a hasty exclamation which brought their fun to a sudden close. Judge Allen was on his feet, and pointing excitedly upward.

"There's the flash!" he cried. "Thar's Branson's signal! Up and away is the word!"

All eyes were turned upward. On the lofty cliff to which the scout had pointed, and at the foot of the blasted pine which overhung its edge, a sharp blaze had suddenly broke into the clear noontide air, the promised signal for action.

But as they continued to look, the blazing material leaped into the air, as from a hasty kick, and came dropping down in flashing fragments along the precipitous rock. In a minute or two its relics dropped into the tree-tops far below and vanished from sight.

"Look! look!" cried one of the men, pointing excitedly upward. "There's trouble above us!"

For an instant the forms of two men, clasped as in deadly struggle, were visible on the beetling edge of the cliff. They seemed to hang over the precipice, and as if nothing could save them from a deadly fall. Then they vanished, as if they had staggered back from the rock edge.

"Elick's in trouble, and of the worst kind!" cried one of the party. "Hurry, boys. There's no time to waste now."

There was no need to repeat this summons. A hasty spring forward took place, and the upward climb was quickly resumed.

"What has become of that boy?" asked Judge Allen, looking around.

"Don't know. He slipped away two hours ago. Likely he has had enough of the fun, and has gone back to Oxford."

"Let him go. He's a green hand at mountain work. Push on, gentlemen!"

With all haste they continued their upward course, by a pass far easier than that which Fred had ascended. Yet it was difficult enough, and the struggle on the cliff was likely to be ended long ere they could reach the height.

We must go up in advance of them, and see what had taken place during their inactivity.

Elick had not been idle during this period. He had made a search through the loftier levels of the mountain; but in vain. No trace of the fugitives was to be found. He had finally made his way to the lookout cliff, gathered some dry twigs for a blaze, and waited patiently for the signal-fires from the outer mountains.

After an hour's wait a flash, and then a blaze, to the right, showed that all was in trim in that

direction. He waited ten minutes more, with his eyes fixed on the western hill. Then the flash showed itself there, through an opening in the trees.

"All's lovely," he cried. "Now for my beacon light."

A burning match, a flash in the dry leaves, then the flame caught the twigs and shot sharply up. Hardly had it done so when an agile form leaped vigorously forward, seized the scout's rifle, that lay on the open rock, and with a sweep of its barrel sent the blazing pile flying into the air over the brow of the cliff. The rifle followed it, with a strong sweep.

"Elick Branson," cried the voice of the interloper, "I don't know what hinders me from flinging you over the rock after your signal-fire."

"You can't do it, Abe Blizzard!" yelled the scout, as he sprung madly forward and grappled with the outlaw. "You are my prisoner, and will go with me to Oxford."

"I'll go with you to the blazes of the lower region first! Look out for yourself! You've got no baby in your hands!"

A fierce struggle ensued, that brought the well-matched contestants nearer and nearer to the dangerous brink, until they toppled on the very edge of the lofty precipice. A single false step now, and both would be dashed to atoms on the rocks below.

CHAPTER V.

THE FISH IN THE NET.

"YE'RE my deer's meat, Elick Branson. What's to hinder me now from tossin' you over the cliff?"

"If you take a boy's advice, you won't do it, Abe Blizzard. It wouldn't be healthy."

This question and answer passed at the top of the mountain cliff. Elick lay prostrate on the hard rock, half stunned by a fierce throw in the struggle with his powerful antagonist. The latter stood over him, one foot upon his breast, with flashing eyes and frowning face.

But the unexpected answer to his question from a strange voice made him turn hastily around. There, on a boulder close by, sat a youthful figure, resting a revolver on his crossed knees, and taking quiet aim at the astounded outlaw.

"Don't do it, Abe," he repeated. "I'm afraid this pistol might go off. If it does, it will give you the worst case of toothache you ever went through."

"Who in the blazes are you?" roared the discomfited outlaw.

"Only a young chap that's come up here to enjoy the scenery. I'm after items, Abe. Guess I've got one. Don't you kick up any didoes now, or I'll get another."

"Why, blast my eyes if it ain't the little sprout that I hailed last night in the dark."

"You've hit it, Abe. You had the revolver hand then. Seems to me I've got it now."

"What do you want?" roared Abe.

"Only an item, Abe."

The cornered villain looked irresolutely around him. He was in a decidedly tight place. The stunned scout was stirring beneath his foot. The

shouts of the party ascending the cliff were coming nearer. There sat the imperturbable boy with a sure aim, and as cool as if he was aiming at a sparrow.

"You want me, eh?" came in a savage growl.

"Yes."

"Then take me! Better dead than a prisoner!"

He made a fierce leap toward the boy, who closed the only avenue of escape from the cliff. In an instant there came the click of the descending lock, but no report. The pistol had hung fire.

Fred sprung hastily to his feet, and again raised his weapon, with a look of deadly determination in his eyes.

"Stop!" he cried, "or down goes your house!"

The outlaw paused, glared wildly at the resolute youth, and then with a fierce oath turned and dashed back to the brow of the cliff, as if with intent to fling himself over the precipice.

A quick spring, and down he went, over the sheer face of the rock. A cry of horror broke from Fred's lips. It was echoed by Elick Branson, who had now regained his senses.

"The desp'rat' devil! He'll be dashed to mince-meat!" roared the scout.

"Down the precipice, sure as shooting!" cried Fred, rushing forward.

He was joined at the brow of the cliff by Elick, who came limping forward. He had been hurt by his fall.

They both looked down the steep face of the precipice with horror-struck eyes. It was so perpendicular that a man might have fallen three hundred feet without touching the rock wall. Far below them a leafy screen of tree-tops closed the view, and shut out the probable fate of the outlaw from their sight.

"Poor fellow! It is all over with him!" groaned Fred, mournfully.

"Don't you bet high on that notion."

Fred turned and looked with surprise at his companion, on whose face appeared a look of shrewd suspicion. He was gazing keenly along the face of the cliff.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Abe's one o' the best mountaineers in these parts. He's not goin' to kill hisself while there's a goat track open. Look down yere, lad. D'ye see that narrer shelf 'bout six foot down, 'long the face of the rock? It slants down'ard and gits wider further on. My head fur a pickled herrin' but that's where Abe jumped to."

Fred looked down. There ran the ledge, apparently not six inches wide. It seemed impossible that any human being could have trusted himself to such a path. His eye followed it for some ten feet. It widened and sloped downward, as Elick had said, until it turned an angle in the rock.

Fred hastened forward to this point, followed limpingly by Elick. There was the track still, now more than a foot wide. At some twenty feet distant it entered a cleft in the rock. Further on the precipice sloped off at an angle.

"The risky hound! He's follered it, fur a fraction!" cried the scout, hurrying forward. "Here it j'ines the rock, and it's easy climbin'

from here on. See here! By the Seven Pipers, but he's a cunnin' coon!"

He pointed down to a spot where the crumbling rock had left a small heap of sandy fragments. In this spot was visible the imprint of a human footstep, as clearly defined as if it had been molded there.

"Do you think he made that?" asked Fred, staring at it steadily.

"That's the size of his hoof. I'm as sure of it as if I see'd him now."

"Then I'm after him," cried the ardent boy. "He fooled me neatly. But I'm not going to be thrown from the track so easily as that."

"Best keep back, boy. You don't know the mountings. And if you catch Abe you'll catch a Tartar."

"All right," cried Fred, resolutely. "Aren't you going ahead?"

"No. The hound flung me so savage that he's took all the go outer me. I'll wait till the folks climb up here. They're nigh at hand now. Best wait."

"Not much," answered the energetic lad, as he sprung forward along the path which the fugitive must have followed.

The voices of the ascending party were now close at hand. They were making as much noise as if they were out on a picnic. Soon the head of the line appeared, winding around the rocks.

"Shoot me if they ain't all turned magpies!" growled the discontented scout. "There's enough blow in 'em to make a batch o' wind pies!"

"Elick!" cried the foremost. "You are safe? You escaped the villain? Have you captured him?"

"Not much. He captured me," came the grumbling reply. "Come ahead, and shut off that windmill."

A few moments more brought the whole party to his side, on the broad shelf at the summit of the cliff.

Judge Allen hastened forward and questioned the guide, while the others were panting from their sharp labor.

A few words, briefly delivered, put the judge in possession of the main facts.

"The boy was up here, and is after the outlaw?" he queried, in amazement.

"Jest so, jedge; and I've a notion if we're spry, we've got the game in our own hands. The lads from Pilot and Old Tom must have stretched their line at the foot by this time, and are comin' up the slope. We've got the run-aways afore us, and kin drive 'em into the net. I'm a bit lamed, and I'll hold this pass with one or two other chaps, so as the game can't work no traverse on us. Push ahead and spread out. Don't leave a spot behind you as ain't s'arched. It's my opinion we've got 'em tight."

The advice he gave was quickly followed. Several of the worn-out members of the party stayed with him, particularly the portly gentleman who had flattened his nose further down the pass. The others pushed onward, rifle in hand, and spreading their line as they advanced so as to cover every available foot of the ground. They went forward now more silently, under Elick's stern admonition. He had told them that

they were worse "than a flock of blackbirds in a corn-patch."

Meanwhile Fred had gone onward on his solitary hunt. Several indications that he was on the right pass came to him as he advanced. In fact, it would not have been easy to take any other course, for the way here led up the stony bottom of a ravine, down which ran a considerable stream. He had to spring from stone to stone as he proceeded, while the lofty sides of the mountain glen almost touched above his head. A screen of bushes hung over the edges and closed out the light until it was very gloomy and dark within.

He continued to follow this damp and gloomy path, which narrowed and grew steeper as he advanced. Finally he reached a point in which the sides of the ravine came almost together, leaving an opening hardly wide enough for a human being to pass through. Here the stepping-stones disappeared, and the swift-flowing water quite filled up its bed. It was almost dark ahead, but he could make out a shelving rock down which the water flowed, and which seemed to end the ravine.

"He couldn't have come any further this way, that's sure," muttered Fred, looking around him for some way out of his difficulty. "Ah! there's the track now. Not a promising path, but there's no other."

A narrow ledge led up the steep rock, broken here and there, yet passable. The cleft was here twenty feet deep, but in a minute the active lad had gained its summit, after a slip or two on the damp, mossy stones.

He paused and looked inquiringly around him. He was still in a rugged and difficult defile, a heap of broken and tossed rocks, cleft in twain by the narrow ravine. Several hundred feet upward was visible a knoll which seemed to be the summit of the mountain.

He resumed his ascent. A few minutes of hard climbing brought him to an easier region. It was still rugged ground, however, and on turning the corner of a huge rock he found himself suddenly face to face with an individual, who seemed quite as surprised as himself at this unlocked-for meeting.

It was not the outlaw leader, but the shrewd lad saw in an instant that it must be one of his followers. It was a tall, cadaverous, evil-faced fellow, who looked as if he had not made acquaintance with a razor for a month.

"Stop there, my friend, I want you."

"You want me?" growled the outlaw.

"Just so. That's what I am here for."

"Then take me!"

With a spring like a cat the fellow leaped forward, and seized Fred ere he could make use of his pistol. The agile boy loosed his hold of the weapon and grappled with his antagonist. In an instant they were firmly locked in each other's grasp.

It was not such an uneven match. Fred was strong and muscular beyond his years, while his antagonist was of a spare figure, and looked half-fed. They wrestled and struggled for several minutes on the rock surface without either gaining an advantage. Fred kept silent, with set lips, while his foe growled and spit like an angry animal.

The lad knew something of the art of wrestling, and quietly maneuvered for a trip which he had been taught. He had just got the desired advantage and twisted his right leg around his antagonist's feet, bearing him strongly back, when there came a sharp report from behind, and a sensation passed through Fred as if his brain had been suddenly seared with a red-hot iron.

Down they went, he and the outlaw in a heap. But the latter in an instant tore himself loose from the unnerved arms of the lad and dashed rapidly away, leaving Fred stretched in a senseless and lifeless heap on the bare ground.

His relaxed limbs lay limp on the barren stone, his face turned in deathlike pallor to the sky, the blood oozed from his head and crimsoned the brown rock surface. Whose hand had fired the fatal shot that had laid the youth lifeless at the very moment of triumph over his antagonist?

CHAPTER VI.

THE END OF THE CHASE.

"Is that you, Bill Hall?"

"I've got a notion it's 'bout my caliber."

"And where are your men?"

"Here they come, arter me. Joe's leadin' his party up yonder side. Where's yourn?"

"Just behind. Seen anything of the runaways?"

"Not a hair. Have you?"

"Not an eyelash."

"Where are they, then?"

"Old Nick knows. They were up here, we know that. They must have slipped your line."

"Nary time. A swallow couldn't have got through unseen."

"They didn't pass ours, that's sure."

"Then where are they?"

The question was easily asked, but not easily answered. The net was drawn, but where were the fish?

The whole mountain had been surrounded by a line of men, who had ascended with an eye on every spot where a fugitive could pass. Yet they had now met together from all sides, a hundred armed men, who looked at each other with doubt and question.

A hundred voices broke the silence, each giving an opinion of the mysterious affair. Judge Allen's party declared that the fugitives must have slipped through the other line. This was scouted by the others, who declared that a rat could not have passed them, and who doubted that the outlays had been on the mountain.

"There you are mistaken," exclaimed the judge. "Blizzard showed himself to us at two different points."

"Elick Branson can swear to that, for he got a nasty fall from Abe," vouched another. "He's limping yet."

"So can I," averred a man who had just come up. "I got a shot in on one of them back there, not ten minutes ago. I dropped my bird, but he jumped up and made for me with a big knife. I got out of his way."

A laugh followed this admission.

"You are drawing the long bow, Jake."

"I can show you the spot if you don't believe me."

A number followed him back to a spot a quarter of a mile away. He led them among some ugly rocks and finally halted and pointed down in triumph. A patch of blood, not yet dried, reddened the rock. It was the spot where Fred had fallen, but he was no longer there.

"Who's a blower now?" exclaimed the man triumphantly. "There's my sign manual. When I shoot something comes down."

"And gets up again," answered a sarcastic member of the party. "And then you get out without waiting to ask questions."

By this time a large group of men had come up.

"Has anybody seen the young lad, the stranger, who had pushed on ahead of us? He certainly should have been outside our line."

They looked doubtfully at one another. Nobody had seen him.

The affair was growing more and more mysterious. A party of no less than eleven outlaws had been on the mountain. They had been inclosed within a living line. The line had been drawn together, yet it was empty. Even the boy, who could have had no motive for concealment, had vanished. It was an extraordinary end to the hunt.

"They must have some hiding-place on the mountain, which we have overlooked," declared Judge Allen.

"Don't believe it," answered Bill Hall, shaking his head positively. "I've hunted over this mountain for ten years. There ain't a spot on it I don't know. Your idear won't work."

The judge looked bewildered. Here was a riddle too hard for all his powers of guessing.

There was but one thing yet to be done: to make a second search of the mountain on their return. After another wordy conference the party broke up, its members moving off in every direction like the beads from a broken string. A rifle-shot was to be the signal of any discovery.

No shot came. They reached the lower slope without a clue to the outlaws. The Oxford party marched back into the town utterly worn out and disheartened. A failure with such fair chances of success seemed to remove all hope. The outlaws could snap their fingers at the authorities.

That evening, after the weary searchers had refreshed themselves with rest and supper, they gathered again in the public room of the hotel, eager to debate concerning the strange mystery of the day's adventure.

"I cannot imagine what became of that young stranger," declared the judge. "That is as strange a thing as I see in the whole affair."

"Who is the boy, and what is his business here?" asked another.

Nobody knew. Fred had said nothing about his mission. Doubt gathered in several faces.

"Is he mixed in with this gang?" asked one. "Perhaps he is a spy, whom they sent to find out our plans."

"That's all rascally nonsense," exclaimed Elick Branson, indignantly. "The lad drew a bee line on Abe Blizzard. He pulled trigger,

too, but his pistol hung fire. Don't tell me. I might ha' been flung over the cliff only fur him."

"Pistols hang fire on purpose sometimes," retorted the doubter.

"Dry up, won't you? Didn't Abe run like a kill deer from the boy?"

"You and me got in all the work to-day, Elick," came in a boasting voice from the opposite side of the room. "I know I dropped my men neat."

"Your men, Jake? There was only one."

"If I said one I lied," declared Jake, boldly.

"There were two. I saw their heads over the rock. I dropped one of them where you saw the blood. The other one made for me with a knife."

"That won't do, Jake. We don't take any second editions here."

"It's the truth, every word of it. I'll swear to it," cried Jake, excitedly rising. "You're all mad because I was the only man that got in any work. I wish the chap I winged was here now to make my word good."

"You've got your wish," came a voice from the door. "The chap you winged is here."

The startled assembly hastily turned at these words, and gazed in surprise and alarm toward the door. There stood a figure which no one recognized. The clothes were soiled and torn, the hair red and matted, the face streaked with brownish-red lines, till he looked almost like an Indian in his war-paint.

"You the chap?" gasped Jake.

"Well, I reckon so, what's left of me, you awkward blowhard of a jack-fool! Excuse me, folks, but this bragging ninny ought to be cooped up in a hen-coop, with a lot of other geese. He's a sweet specimen to take out on a hunt."

"Why, it's the boy himself!" exclaimed Elick, hurrying eagerly forward. "What is the matter, lad? What has happened?"

"Got shot by a fool," answered Fred, for it was he. "I had one of the outlaws safe nabbed, when I got my head creased by a rifle-bullet, and I've just heard this puppy bragging about firing it. He ought to be laid down somewhere for a door-mat, that's my notion. And I'd like to be the first to wipe my feet on him."

Fred was boiling over with anger. The bragging huntsman recoiled before his eyes, and slunk back into the room. He had not a word to say.

"By heavens, the boy tells the truth!" exclaimed Elick, examining Fred's skull. "He has made a deuce of a narrer escape. Where have you been since, young 'un?"

"Let me wash the blood from my face first, and I will tell you," answered Fred.

A half-hour afterward he re-entered the room, a very different-looking personage. Under Elick's skillful hands he had got his face cleaned and his wound dressed, while his soiled clothing had been made more presentable.

"Tisn't as bad as I was afeard," announced the scout. "It's only a skull-crease. Bled free, but won't hurt the lad. He'll be sound ag'in afore a week."

"As for my story, gentlemen, I have but little to tell," declared Fred. "As I told you, I met one of the outlaws and grappled with him. He

was a slim fellow, not quite my match. I had got in a neat trip on him, and was just fetching him down, when there came a red-hot blow on my head. Down I went like a log."

"That was Jake's neat shot," explained Elick, looking around.

But Jake had disappeared.

"I suppose I was out of my senses for awhile," continued Fred. "When I came to I found my head covered with blood. I didn't know what had happened, and never did know till I got to the door here and heard that jackdaw bragging. I thought the outlaw had knifed me."

"How did you get here?" asked Judge Allen.

"I hardly know. I got to my feet and made my way over the rocks. I was weak, but I managed to slide down the hills. I have been staggering on ever since dark, and just got in."

Fred was now decidedly the lion of the hour. All the glory of the day had been his. He had saved Elick Branson from a deadly peril, and nearly captured the leader of the outlaws. He had grappled another of the gang. This was just before the scouting-party had come up. The mystery was redoubled by this information. Here was evidence that at least one of the outlaws had been within the net when its folds had been almost closed. How had he escaped? Where had he concealed himself?

This question was asked Fred, who shook his head in reply, as he sipped a stimulating beverage which the landlord had mixed for him.

"It is a strange affair right through," he declared. "I don't undertake to explain it. Is there any cave or hiding-place on the mountain?"

"No," answered Elick. "Nothing bigger than a fox-hole. Leastways I've tramped it fur years and ought to know it pretty sound."

The conversation continued for several hours, but Fred early withdrew. He stood greatly in need of rest. His business in the town was yet a mystery to the good people assembled, but they unanimously voted him a bold and daring youth, who deserved the thanks of the community.

Fred had a heavy item on hand for the *Star*, but it had to wait till the next day. It was three days, indeed, ere he was fairly able to be out. By that time his healthy young blood had begun to assert itself, his wound had closed, and showed signs of rapidly healing.

"I'm as good as ten dead men yet," declared Fred, joyfully, glad to get once more into the fresh outdoor air.

By the next day he was quite strong again, and walked quite freely about the town, in which his adventure had made him quite a lion.

"Ah, Mr. Flyer," exclaimed Judge Allen, warmly, on meeting him. "I am glad to see you abroad again. Will you not come home with me? My wife and daughter have heard of your exploits, and are very anxious to meet you and hear the story from yourself."

"Certainly, judge," answered Fred, who had not forgotten the very pretty girl he had seen by lamplight a few days before. "I shall be glad to do so."

"That's clever. Come right now, if you don't object."

"By the way," asked Fred, as they walked along. "How about that threat which hangs over your head? Has Abe Blizzard shown his hand yet?"

"No danger of that," answered the judge. "It is only a wild threat. I have a fancy that these fellows will make themselves scarce, and not trouble us again."

He opened the door of his house, and led his young companion into a handsomely-furnished room, where sat a fresh-faced, middle-aged lady, and the blooming girl whom Fred had met before.

"My wife and daughter," he introduced. "My dear, this is Mr. Flyer, the youthful hero of Camel's Back."

"I am happy to congratulate him," answered the lady, bowing gracefully.

The younger lady courtesied deeply, to conceal a conscious blush that came to her face. She had recognized her handsome boy visitor of a few nights before.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW FRED NABBED THE GANG.

A WEEK has passed since Fred Flyer set off in such eager haste from his home. Within that modest mansion all looks to-night as home-like as it did on that occasion. Mr. Flyer is seated on his favorite settee, smoking his pipe, and reading the paper.

Mrs. Flyer is busy over the stove, looking after the supper. The two younger folks are sprawling upon the floor, one busily engaged in studying his school lesson, the other slyly tying an apron-string to the cat's tail.

"I tell you our Fred's a coon!" ejaculated the father, as he threw down the paper. "He's a spry lad, or there never weren't none."

"What is he up to last, Jacob?" Mrs. Flyer turned with great interest from the stove.

"Dunno. Ain't read the evening paper yet. This is the *Star*, where he tells all about how the outlaws have been robbing stores and houses, and how they've been setting traps for the foxes, but the foxes won't drop in."

"Oh, that's stale. I read that ten hours ago. See if there's anything in the evening paper."

"Don't s'pose there is. Ain't often anything." He took up the paper in question, and turned over its pages.

Several minutes passed in silence. Then a sharp ejaculation broke from Mr. Flyer's lips.

"By Jack and Gill," he cried, "but here's high old sport! Deuce take that rascally boy, I always said he'd come to the gallows!"

"Who are you talking about, Jacob? What do you mean anyhow?" Mrs. Flyer's face was red, and her voice hot with anger.

"I mean Fred. Here he's gone and got himself into a deuce of a scrape, like he's always doing."

"What is it? Read it out, quick!"

Her excited tones startled the cat, which sprung up, and darted wildly about the room, scared by the white thing tied to its tail.

"Drat the cat! What ails the creature? What you been doing to it, you young varmint?"

"It's only got mammy's apron twisted round

it," answered young hopeful. "Come here, puss. Nice pussy."

But pussy choose to go out the window through a broken pane, so close to Mr. Flyer's head that the apron switched round his ears, and held fast, only the broken string clinging to puss's tail.

"You confounded little jackanapes."

The mover of this mischief did not wait to hear more. He knew what was likely to follow as soon as his dad got his head clear from the apron, and made a bee line for the door, in which he was aided by a slap from the flat of his mother's hand, which sent him through the door like an avalanche.

"The young rascal. He wants a trouncing. And he'll get it, too, drat his dirty hide!"

"Oh, never mind that, Jacob. I'll switch him soundly to-morrow. Got a whole week to settle for. But what is it about our Fred? You know I'm dying to hear."

"He's gone and got himself in a nasty old scrape. The outlaws burst into a big grocery store late last night, and tore round lively. But they got ambushed by the people, and had to run for their lives. The folks only nabbed one of the party in the store. And who do you think that was?"

"How the gracious should I ever know? Abe Blizzard?"

"Fred Flyer; sure as you live."

"Our Fred?" The mother's voice rose to a scream.

"Dead sure. Mixed up with the gang. That's a sweet outlook for our Fred. The folks there swear he's one of the party, and they'll put him through a course of sprouts."

"Our Fred? Oh, you're fooling, Jacob. I can't believe it!"

"Read it for yourself, then. There's the paper."

Mr. Flyer plumped himself down angrily on a settee.

"And you don't mean to say that they've locked him up? Our Fred? For a thief?"

"Not much, mother. Got to catch your goose before you can cook it."

Mr. Flyer sprung up as if he had been stung by a bee. These words came through the broken window-pane, out which the cat had just leaped. He turned sharply round.

"Who in the blue blazes is that?"

"It's Fred! My Fred! Our Fred! Don't you know the voice? Oh, you Fred!"

Further speech was drowned in a shower of kisses, from the youth who had just sprung through the open door, and clasped the lady in a warm embrace.

"Fred! By gosh!"

"Tain't nobody shorter, dad. Ain't in any Oxford lock-up, no matter what that paper says. Just been listening to you reading, dad."

"You young rascal!" Mr. Flyer caught his hand and wrung it warmly. "Hang me if I was ever so glad to see anybody yet. How d'ye do, Fred, anyhow? And how the blazes did you get off?"

"Tell you after supper. I'm hungry as a wolf. Got any grub, mother? Come down in the lightning-express, and no time for lunch on the road."

"Supper! Of course there is. If it ain't all burnt up. To think of your coming in that way! Why, you've given me a regular setback."

"It's me, anyhow. These are my fingers, and this is my nose. No wax-work figure this time. Had a tight squeeze, you bet. Couldn't nab this coon, though. But let's have supper. Then we can talk."

"Certainly! Of course!" Mrs. Flyer turned to her neglected cooking, which was frying away lustily over the fire.

"You didn't jump into no mine this time, Fred?" asked his younger brother, looking up to the young hero with eyes full of admiration.

"Not quite that bad, Bobby. But been down holes and up mountains, and fooling folks the worst way. They don't guess who I am out there. Playing sly on them. Think I'm General Jackson, or the King of the Canary Islands. What you got for supper, mamma?"

"Mutton hash, Fred. And fried 'taters. And hominy."

"That's prime. Been eating stewed rattle-snake and bear's 'ile out yonder."

"You lie you rascal!" growled Mr. Flyer.

"That's 'cause I'm hungry. Can't be trusted when I'm hungry. If you ever want me to tell the truth again, you'd best pile on the grub."

"Freddy, my boy, I'm 'feared it hasn't been any good to your merals to go West," cried his mother, as she hurried up the supper, lest Fred should get off another whopper. "I wish you could only stay home, among pious folks."

"Yes, down at the *Star* office. Sweet and pious, they are. Why, them chaps tell so many lies that the sky looks green out of the office windows. It gets in the paper once in a while, too. 'Tain't all truth that you see in the *Star*--My! that's prime! Ain't no hash out West like yourn, mamma."

"Oh, you Fred!" exclaimed the mother, with a gratified air.

"It's solid fact, anyhow. Where's snippy!"

"Slid from a scorchin'; the blamed young varmint!" growled Mr. Flyer.

"Hillo! Been at his tricks again, has he? Oh, come, dad, let him off this time. Fred's back, you know."

"Always letting him up. That's why he's sich a rascally sprout. You're too tender of his hide, lad."

"Only this time, dad."

"Well, being's you'r back, Fred--"

He had no time to finish. The young culprit had been crouching in terror just outside the door. He ran hastily in at these words, his eyes dancing.

"Oh, Fred! That's ever so good!"

"Come here, you rat!" cried the father, snatching angrily at him. "You're a bit too soon. I hadn't got through, yet."

"Oh my! you ain't a-goin to wallop me after telling Fred-- 'Tain't fair, nohow. 'Twasn't me, anyhow. 'Twas the cat."

"Here, snippy." Fred gathered him up into his lap. "You keep mum, and you can eat out of a corner of my plate. Dad's only funning."

"Am I?" came the grim answer. "He's learning 'rithmetic at the school. See if I don't teach him how to add up. I'll add this scorch-

ing onto the next, and show him how much one and one makes."

The culprit laughed slyly to himself. He calculated to make the sum one in subtraction, as he had often done before. He began his exercise by the subtraction of victuals from the table.

Mr. Flyer cooled down slowly. He was one of the sort that heat quick and cool slow. But supper had a mollifying effect upon his temper, and by the time he got through he was as mild as a cherub.

"Now, Fred, let's hear how it all came out."

They were gathered around the table, on which burned the evening lamp.

"Been through the mill," answered Fred, shrugging his shoulders. "They came near making me into a dredge-bow with bullet-holes. Want me to begin at the beginning?"

"No. Tell us about this store scrape first; we'll take t'other afterward, to top off."

"Well, somebody's been robbing up in Potter county. I ain't dead sure it's Abe Blizzard's gang, but the folks swear it is. They've been laying for them ever since we had the mountain hunt, but they couldn't nail anybody. Then I took it in hand. Items were getting scarce. I was afraid the *Star* might quit shining, so I thought I'd stir up some; and it was a neat stir up, now you bet!"

"Always is, Fred, when you get your finger in the pie," said Mrs. Flyer.

Fred laughed slyly to himself. He knew that if he had a genius for getting into scrapes, he had an equal genius for getting out of them, so he rather enjoyed his mother's opinion.

"Knewed they must be getting short of grub, and calculated they'd make their next break on a provision store, so I hung 'round a country grocery just out of Oxford, kept by a chap called Bill Barley. I smelt the thieves coming that way, and so they did. They made for it last night, and I caught them."

"You caught them?"

"Just so," answered Fred, gravely. "Caught the whole gang. Made them go along with me toward the store—me in the middle, and them around."

"Why, you young villain!" broke out his father. "Are you playing on us?"

"Nary time, dad. They persuaded me to go along—persuaded me with a revolver. You never saw such a nice taking way they have. Thought I'd just go along and see what they were after; then I could bring them back and land them in the lock-up, you know."

"Now, Fred," cried his mother, lifting her hands in deprecation, "why can't you tell a story straight? They took *you*, that's it. You got among them, and they wouldn't let you go."

"Shouldn't wonder if some of them looked at it that way," answered the grave boy. "I thought all along some of them had the whim they had nabbed me. They calculated they were taking me along so that I couldn't raise the alarm. They didn't know what I was up to, you see."

"Now, drop that, Fred, or I'll burst your boiler," cried his father, angrily. "You ought

to be ashamed of yourself, playing off your jokes on your daddy and mammy."

"Anyhow," continued Fred, as if there had been no interruption, "they kept persuading me with that revolver till we came to the store. Then some of them persuaded the door to come open, and took me in, while the rest stood on watch outside. I wasn't interested, you know. I just squatted myself on a cheese-box, and looked on while they were passing out hams, and crackers and the like. Had my note-book out taking down items. Just then there came a sort of a roar outside, and a kind of a run inside, and a ripping, and cracking, and yelling, as if a big riot had broke loose. Such a noise you never heard. It struck me it wasn't healthy, so I put away my note-book, and slid for the door."

"There was an attack?"

"Yes. And I was the only robber caught. The rest all got away, but I plumped right into the hands of a big chap that nabbed me just like a rat would a bit of cheese. You bet I felt blue when I saw all my nice game bu'sted. And it wasn't pretty to hear them saying, 'Didn't I tell you so?' 'Knew he was mixed with them.' 'He's a spy.' 'Lock him up, we'll railroad him, anyhow.' They couldn't listen to a spark of reason; but just handed me over to a constable, who was one of the party. He snatched me off, while the rest went after the runaway gang."

"I said so, Fred. Another of your scrapes. You're always getting into them."

"Always getting out of them, too, ain't I? Got out of this one, anyhow."

"You must, or you wouldn't be here. How did you do it, Fred?"

"Just pulled the wool over that constable's eyes. Made him think I was made up of honey and sugar-cane. Then I gave him a sly push off a bit of rock, and brung him down on his nose. While he was cursing, I was sliding. He pelted after me, though, you bet. Fired off five or six revolvers. Might have thought there was a heavy wind the way the lead whistled."

"And didn't hit you?"

"I wasn't a barn-door, and that's what he was firing at. Anyhow I slung him. Trotted across country. Walked near forty mile, I reckon. Then took a train. Here I am now, and done with Abe Blizzard. Don't catch me up there again soon, nohow."

An hour afterward Fred was safe in bed, taking the rest he needed after his wearisome adventure.

CHAPTER VIII

ABE BLIZZARD GETS EVEN WITH THE JUDGE.

FRED'S advent into the *Morning Star* office the next day made no less a sensation than he had made at home. Editors, reporters, and the whole fraternity generally, sprung from chair and stool, and made for him with a host of questions.

"Glad to see you, Fred. Knew tha was all a lie about your robbing a grocery store. It's one of the telegraph facts. But we've got it here. It was wired to us just the same. What's in it, anyhow? And what brings you here? You haven't worked out the Blizzard mine yet."

"Too hot up there to hold me," answered Fred, with a shrug. "There's only one weak spot in that story, there's too much truth in it. It's boiling over with facts. That's what brings me down. They're too pressing hospitable up there. Wouldn't let me come at all if I hadn't slid when I did."

"Oh, come, Fred! That's taffy. Out with the solid fact now."

"The solid fact is I was laying for the gang, and tumbled into them. They took me along with a pistol at my ear, and promised me salt in my coffee if I whimpered. Well, they robbed the store, the town folks pelted for them, they slid, and I got nabbed, that's all."

"Not much. There's more behind all this. Finish it up, Fred."

"Nothing more, except I told the constable he wasn't good-looking enough to keep company with me. He requested me to stay, but I politely declined. He sent some messenger-boys after me to coax me back, but I wasn't coaxable."

"Messenger-boys? What sort of messenger-boys?"

"Bullets. That's the sort. Sowed them around lively. But the rain was too scattering. I walked between the drops."

"You young villain!" The chief editor caught Fred by the shoulders and gave him a lively shaking. "Can't you tell a plain story, just for once? Just to oblige Benson?"

"Hand me a chair," cried Fred. "I'll tell you all about it."

He had an interested audience, as he told the story of his stirring adventures in Oxford and its vicinity. Fred was a good talker, and made his account very graphic. No work was done on the *Star* for the next half-hour.

"That's all," he at length declared. "You've had the cream of it in my letters. This is only the skim-milk to fill up. But I've done with Oxford. Dropped it like a hot potato. Only one thing there I took a fancy to."

"One thing, eh! What was that, Fred?"

"Just the prettiest little angel in calico that ever took the starch out of Paradise. Too high-toned for me, though. Big family. Got a judge for daddy. And I'm only poor Fred Flyer, whose daddy piles pig iron, when he ain't loafing and pipe-smoking. Might as well try to whistle down a star. Good-bye to Minnie Allen. She's two huckleberries above me. Whiff, and off it goes." He puffed his lips as if he had blowu a whiff of smoke into the air. "That ends that. Now what's up? I'm on hand for duty."

"You can take a day's holiday, Fred. Go out to the romantic banks of the Schuylkill and mourn over your lost love. Come, gentlemen, time's flying. Pens, paste and scissors. Down to work again."

He was quickly back at his desk and his pen flying like lightning over the paper, as if he had an idea which he wanted to shoot on the wing. The rest of the party got back slowly to their work, while Fred wandered through the office, chatting here and there.

While this was going on a messenger-boy entered, and handed a telegram to the chief. The latter opened it and ran his eye hastily

over its contents. A shrill whistle came from his lips that startled everybody in the office.

"More Potter county," he cried. "Here's something rich and entertaining. Why, Fred, you came away from the circus before the performance got started. You'll have to go back again."

"Not if the court knows herself," answered Fred, decidedly. "Left the pot boiling there. Ain't going to pelt back into the scalding water."

"Potter county, eh?" asked another. "Anything stirring?"

"Yes. The outlaws have abducted the daughter of one of the chief magnates of the town. The whole country is up."

Fred started as if a hornet had stung him.

"Who is it?" he demanded, in almost a threatening tone.

"This is villainous writing. It's Judge Ap— At—"

"Judge Allen?"

"Yes, that's it. Judge Allen."

"Then it's Fred's sweetheart, Minnie Allen, that the hounds have stolen."

"The deuce! That's a bad go."

Fred stood silent, and as if overwhelmed. All the blood seemed to have left his face, and he was as pale as a ghost. A moment thus, and then it came back with a gush.

"I've reconsidered my resolution," he said, in a very quiet tone. "I will go back to Oxford."

"What for, Fred? What can you do? You will only get into trouble."

"Won't be the first time. Reckon I can take care of number one. I'll tell you what. Abe Blizzard threatened the judge with revenge, if he didn't give up the chase. And this is it. He's stolen little Minnie. Poor little thing, I'll have her or leave my head. Those hounds have a hiding-place somewhere on Camel's Back Mountain, and I'm bound to find it. Got an idea about where it lies."

"Good for you, Fred," cried an enthusiastic youth. "That's the way to break down the fence between the judge's bench and the pig-iron pile. Get the girl from their clutches and who knows what may come of it?"

"I don't care a nickel what comes of it," answered Fred, angrily. "Do you suppose that's what I'm after? I haven't gone into the retail business yet. If I was a man and could marry the girl to-morrow, I wouldn't do it on that plea. But I'm going to bu'st back for Oxford, sure as shooting."

But leaving the *Morning Star* office for the present, we must take a quick flight back to Oxford, where all was in uproar and confusion from the event briefly telegraphed to the city.

The abduction had taken place on the preceding day, at an hour shortly after that in which Fred so suddenly appeared at his paternal home. Minnie Allen had been on a visit to a friend at a short distance outside the town. She had left there on her return in the dusk of the evening, utterly unaware that a pair of dark eyes watched her movements, and a pair of wolf-like feet slunk along on a path parallel to the road which she followed, without a suspicion of danger.

What succeeded was not yet known. It was

only known that she had failed to return home as promised. But no uneasiness was felt until it began to grow late, without a sign of her return. Finally Judge Allen had gone over to the friend's house where Minnie was visiting, thinking it too late for her to come home alone. To his astonishment and alarm, he learned that she had set out for home three hours before.

The alarm rapidly spread. The town was searched. No trace of the missing girl could be found. Quickly the people of the town turned out with lanterns, and set in train a thorough search of the road which she must have followed and the adjoining localities.

This search had an alarming ending. Stuck in a crevice of a rail of the roadside fence was found a scrap of white paper, which one of the more curious of the party captured and examined. Its contents explained the mystery.

It was a penciled note, written on a soiled sheet, to the following effect:

"JUDGE ALLEN:—Them as kicks out must 'spect to git kicks back. You wouldn't take warnin', so you kin take t'other. Told you I'd sting you sore, and I have. The gal's my game. You'll never sot eyes on her ag'in till we all git a free pass out this diggin's, and cash to set us up in a honest life. My post-office is the bald spot on old Camel Back's nose.
ABEL BLIZZARD."

The effect of this precious epistle was immense. Word of what had happened sped with wonderful rapidity from end to end of the county. By morning there was not a village that did not know of the abduction by the outlaws, and by noon of the next day the news had spread through the farm-houses, until the whole county was up in excited indignation. Judge Allen was universally respected, and many a harsh oath was taken that day to hunt down the fugitives to death, and revenge bitterly the outrage which they had committed.

It was impossible for any one to settle down to his regular occupation. Hundreds were out all day on the hills, with the forlorn hope of discovering the much-searched outlaws. Others debated for hours in hope of getting the idea of some plan of countermining the villains. Many thought it advisable that the judge should come to terms with the outlaw leader. Abe certainly had the whip hand now, and there was no telling to what outrage he might be driven if the search was continued. The great majority, however, were in favor of pushing the villains to the wall. And to this idea the bereaved father assented, though his heart was almost broken in the effort.

Near evening a conference was held in the main parlor of the Oxford Hotel, attended by the principal people of the place, among them several who had spent the day in a fruitless search of Camel's Back.

About the same time a passenger train had rolled into the station of the town, unloaded its few passengers, and steamed away again. One of these, a spry, youthful figure, walked briskly toward the hotel, with less difficulty than the same figure had experienced on a previous landing in the town. It was, in fact, Fred Flyer.

In the hotel conference the conversation had got round to his name.

"That boy is mixed in this," declared the

constable, positively. "That's what brought him to town. He was sent to spy out the chances."

"That's all gammon," declared Elick Branson. "You're mad 'cause he tripped you, that's all. You had no business peltin' bullets at the boy, and if you'd hurt him I'd bu'sted yer head."

"What brought him into that store? Tell me that, will you?"

"His feet. Don't I know he was scoutin' fer the robbers? I was out one night with him. He tumbled among 'em, that's all. If the lad ain't honest, then— Hillo!" The old hunter sprung to his feet with this exclamation, his eyes staring at the door, in which stood a well-remembered figure.

"Square for you, Elick," exclaimed Fred, for it was he. "Give me your hand on that, old man."

By this time everybody in the room was on his feet, and a dozen loud exclamations broke out.

"Hang it, boy, you'd best have stayed away!" cried Elick, squeezing his hand vigorously. "But I'm your backer through thick and thin, square up."

"Didn't intend to come back," answered Fred, "till I heard of this last bit of work. I'm here to help rescue the young lady, and help I will, while there's a hair on my head or a nail on my fingers."

This spirited declaration elicited a burst of applause from several of the persons present. Others kept silent, however, and the constable sprung angrily forward.

"I've a notion you won't have much chance," he declared. "You are my prisoner. Into Oxford lock-up you go, till you are tried for store-breaking."

"Hold yer level," cried Elick, getting between the officer and the boy. "Don't be too hasty. We've got to have a bit of a confab on that p'int of law."

"By heavens, I'll have him!" The irate officer caught hold of Elick to hurl him aside.

"Will you? Slide, boy, while your skin's whole. The p'int o' law jist now is ag'in' you."

"Will you obstruct the law?"

"Oh, no," said Elick, standing as immovable as an oak tree. "Jist push me out o' the way. I'm a bit rheumatic in the j'int, and don't move easy."

The constable sought to push him aside, but he might as well have tried to move a house. Finally, with an oath, he loosed his hold, and sprung around him.

Too late. Where the boy had stood was a vacancy. Fred had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

CHAPTER IX.

AT A MOUNTAIN LUNCH-COUNTER.

THE strange appearance and disappearance of the mysterious youth made new matter for the attention of the town meeting. A wide difference of opinion prevailed. Some sided with the constable, and believed that Fred was a spy sent out by the outlaws. Others had faith in his integrity, and looked on him as a useful associate.

"Don't tell me. Guess I've been thief-catcher long enough to twig a reprobate when I see him," averred the constable. "The boy's got the making of a bad one. You can see it in his eye. And I'll have him, or the feathers will fly somewhere."

"I agree with you, Jerry," answered Judge Allen. "I doubt if the boy is honest. What reason can he have for concealing his business?"

"Why, bless you, judge, that's jist what I like him fur," declared the old hunter. "I don't cotton to that sort as goes round with a label on their caps: 'My name's Tom Fiddler, and I git my livin' by rag-pickin'.' I like a chap as kin keep hisself to hisself. And I tell you that boy is as sound at center as a hickory-nut that has jist drapped."

"Hickory-nuts often drop because they're rotten at heart," rejoined the constable. "The boy's my meat, I tell you. He's got to prove hisself innocent, and he won't find that no baby's job."

He stalked angrily from the room, bitterly determined to arrest the boy when and where he could find him.

But Fred Flyer was not the lad to be picked up at a venture. Jerry scoured the town in vain. No trace of the fugitive could be found. It looked as if he had made for the hills, to spend the night out of doors in that chill October weather.

For an hour the irate constable kept up the hunt, and then gave it over in despair.

"I'll nail him to-morrow, if he's about town," he declared. "If he's with his jail-breaking friends, we'll take them in a heap. I bet you I prove my words before I am through with this job."

A half-hour afterward Elick Branson returned to his cottage on the mountain flank, a short distance outside the town. He stalked in and flung down his cap angrily.

"That Jerry Brown is the most rantankerous idiot," he began. He stopped suddenly, and stood looking in surprise before him. For there sat Fred Flyer, as coolly as if he had just rented the house.

"Hillo, boy!" he cried. "You here? Why, I thought you'd made a bee line fur the mounting. There's Jerry Brown swearin' he'll barbecue you without pepper."

"Got to catch his cow before he can milk it," Fred coolly answered. "I ain't quite a fool, Elick. Wasn't brought up to sleep with Potter county for a bed and Camel's Back for a pillow, and with the sky for a bed-cover. That's too much like putting on airs. I thought I'd call round and see if you couldn't find me a shake-down and a morsel of grub."

"Well, I'd smile!" answered Elick, heartily. "Guv us yer hand, boy. Glad to have you. My best feather-bed's yourn; and a clear sheer of all the grub in the shanty. And if Jerry Brown don't like that he kin soak his head in buttermilk. Supper 'most ready, mother? We've got young gentleman company."

"He's as welcome as the flowers of May," answered Mrs. Branson, heartily, from the kitchen. "Ready in ten minutes."

"That's clever. I want to hold a confab with

you, young man, arter supper. You've got some idears. And that's more than I'd like to say fur all the folks in this here diggin's."

Fred took his share of the supper with an appetite. He was as much at home as if he had lived there for six months. To-morrow might take care of itself. He was safe for the night, and wasn't the boy to borrow trouble.

After supper Elick lit his pipe, and seated himself in the chimney corner for a long chat with his visitor. We need not say that the search for the outlaws, and the abduction of Minnie Allen, were the main subjects of their conversation.

"Guess it's about bedtime," declared Elick, at length, after a couple of hours had passed. "We're 'arly snoozers, out hereaway; and 'arly risers. So we're o' one mind. Them chaps is hid somewheres 'bout where you got the bullet scratch on yer top-knot."

"That's my notion. And I tell you this, Elick. I wouldn't be here to-night only I've took a boy's fancy for pretty Minnie Allen. It isn't no love, you know, nor any of that nonsense. But Abe Blizzard has got to give her up, or I'll comb his hair."

"In course I know," answered Elick, with a sly wink to his wife. "Boy and gal fancy. Time 'nough fur love when you've l'arnt how to shingle a meetin'-house. Come, bunk's the word. And be sure and keep the gal out of your dreams."

The night slipped by without a creak in its axles. Fred was past dreaming. He was sleeping now for business, and he woke up the next morning with a week's work in his veins. It was yet dusk. Only the first red flush of the dawn touched the edge of the sky. Elick was no hand to let the daylight catch him in bed.

"Now, my lad, go's the word," he declared. "'Tain't healthy fur you 'round here. Streak up the mounting. Jerry Brown won't trouble you there. I've got some chores to do, but I'm goin' to climb them hills afore noon. I mought bring down a deer, and mought bring down a Blizzard. You understand where we're to meet, and trade cheeks?"

"I won't forget," answered Fred, as he examined the loads of his revolver. "I suppose I'd better dig out right now, before the sun gets his nose up."

"What, without any grub in your meal-chest? What sort of a skunk do you take me fur? Breakfast's smokin' on the table now. Come in and fill up. Why, young 'un, the old woman wouldn't leave a hair in my head if I let you go off that way. And I'm goin' to treat you to as sweet a slice o' venison steak as was ever shot in the Alleghanies."

As may be imagined, Fred was not loth to do justice to his new friend's good cheer. And breakfast over, the hospitable lady of the house pressed on him a lunch that looked big enough to keep a hungry bear in a week's provisions.

"Much obliged, Mrs. Branson," Fred laughingly declared, "but my shoulders are not broad enough. Just put me up a couple of sandwiches, and I'll make out."

"But who knows when you may set down to table ag'in?" remarked the anxious matron. "Elick's duberous but you mought go hungry."

"Not likely, while I'm in your hands. I know the way back, if I get near starvation. Now that's enough—oceans. Good-by. Fling your slipper after me for luck, Mrs. Branson. I'm going for Minnie Allen, and old Abe's got to get up early in the morning if he wants to fling this locomotive off the track."

Away went the light-hearted fellow, with a step as free as a deer's, and a heart as light as a king's. He was in the first flush of youth and health. He had trust in his luck and his pluck. There was a new world of a mountain range before him. The briskness of the October air was in his veins. Up the eastern sky came the sun, blinking at him with rosy eyes. It was a glorious morning. Nature was alive and cheery, and Fred had got some of her electricity in his boots. The mountain was to him like an ant-hill, as he trudged lightly upward.

Noon found him high up on the mountain, not quite so spry on his feet, but as warm of heart as ever. He had had a hard hunt for several hours for the hiding-place of the outlaws, but all in vain. Every nook and crevice which Fred could find in the locality he had diligently explored, but without finding a hole that could hide a beetle.

"That's all very pretty, Mrs. Partington," he said to himself. "But they're not a half-mile off from this spot, I'll bet lively on that. They were inside the line we drew round them that day, and I don't believe they crept through it. And nobody saw them flying over it, through the air. What's left, then? They must have sunk into the rock. That's where they are, somewhere inside the rock. And I'll find them if I have to take a month, and turn over every stone between here and Old Tom off yonder."

Fred looked around him. He was in a sort of natural nook, with high rocks on three sides of him. On the fourth was a narrow opening, by which he had entered. The sun, now high in the heavens, shone warmly down into this rock fastness.

"It's a sort of natural lunch-counter," averred Fred. "And it seems to me that there's a hollow inside here as big as a hogshead. I don't see any better fun just now than to sit down and go for Mrs. Branson's lunch. Wish I'd brought more, now. Didn't properly gauge the size of a mountain appetite."

He seated himself cosily in his strong arm-chair, flung his hat lightly aside, and drew with some difficulty the bulky sandwiches from his pocket. He fell to with a decided relish. Hunger and venison steak combined to make his meal a most appetizing one.

His appetite satisfied he leaned back in the warm sun-rays for a comfortable rest. A half-hour passed, without a bee or a butterfly to break the perfect calm. Fred thought he was keeping up a big think, and did not notice the sly fingers of sleep, that were drawing cobwebs over his drowsy eyes.

He was not exactly in a snooze, but he was not many miles away from the land of dreams, when there came a heavy step, and a cry of surprise, that brought him back to his senses as suddenly as if somebody had shot an arrow into his ear.

"Hallo! By the blue blazes that played be-

fore Moses, if this ain't gay! Why, I'm shot if I didn't think that coon was in limbo for plunderin' Bill Barley's grocery store!"

Fred's wide-open eyes took in the situation at a glance. There before him, filling up the entrance to his rock den, stood the burly figure of Abe Blizzard, quite as much surprised as was the boy he had so rudely awakened.

Fred scrambled hastily to his feet. Here was a situation in which quick wits were decidedly necessary.

"Glad to see you, Abe," he heartily said. "Didn't build on no such good company. This is counter number one on my lunch route. Won't you take a bite? Got some grub left."

"Don't keer if I do," answered Abe, with a grim laugh. "You're a cool'un, boy. Pass over the provender."

Fred did so. The sturdy outlaw seated himself coolly on the rock before him, and munched away hungrily.

It was a decided situation. A half-hour before it was the height of Fred's wishes to get his eyes on Abe Blizzard. But he did not quite relish the way that Abe Blizzard had got his eyes on him. It looked like a turn of the tables.

"That's deuced good," declared the outlaw. "Got any more?"

"Cleaned out," answered Fred.

"You're sound on the goose, anyhow. And I like you. See here. They snatched you arter that store-openin'. How did you git off? Any sort of a hab'us corpus?"

"Dusted away," answered Fred. "Made tracks for the city. Thought I had about enough of that game."

"And if you'd had the wit of a suckin' pig you'd stayed in the city. What the Jericho fetches you back here again?"

"I'll tell you what, Abe," Fred straightened himself with dignity. "As long as you had a row with men only, I was satisfied to keep clear of the fight. But when you changed the campaign and began to war on women, I whistled back again. You've done a dirty trick, in carrying off that young girl. Let her go, and I drop the game. Hang on to her, and I'm going to hunt you till my toes drop off."

Abe sat, looking grimly at the bold-speaking boy. For a minute or two he continued his observation, without a word. But if he thought to look down his youthful antagonist he was mistaken. Fred's eyes had in them the blue glitter of steel.

"So that's what you're arter, eh?" growled Abe, with an evil glare in his eyes. "Now, I tell you what, boy, you're meddlin' in men's work. That gal's my prize."

"Is it men's work to steal girls?" answered Fred, sternly. "Where girls are concerned boys have some say. You took Minnie Allen to sting her father, did you? You stung more than her father. You stung me, too."

"So-so. Is that the way of the wind? You're soft on the gal, hey?"

"No matter what I am. Let the girl go, and I'm your friend. Keep her and I'm your foe. You hear that. And you won't find me any baby."

"Dry up, now!" Abe's tone was angry. "Pretty fool I'd be to let a puppy-dog bark me

out o' my wits. Now see here, boy. This time I guv you warnin'; next time I'll guv you wuss. Jist you take keer how you stir up the hornets' nest, 'cause there's stings about. Take old Abe's advice, and slide while yer skin's whole."

"Then you won't give up the girl?"

"Nary time."

"That settles it. I'm going for you, Abe."

"All correck. Come on, midget."

"It's war to the knife, then?"

"Or to the pistol."

Abe was on his feet, pistol in hand.

"I'm goin', boy. Don't you try to foller me, if you know when you're well off. If I pull this trigger, you kin order yer coffin."

The fierce outlaw backed off, his eyes fixed with threatening sternness on Fred's face. In a moment he disappeared. Fred made no move to follow. He was satisfied it would not be healthy just then.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE TRACK OF AN ADVENTURE.

It was a peculiar situation in which Fred had been left, and one rather aggravating to his brisk young blood.

Outside went the man whom, of all others, he desired to follow, yet he was not fool enough to attempt it. He had caught the glare in Abe's eyes, and he knew that they meant shoot; and he had heard enough of Abe's skill with the pistol not to want to play target for him.

Yet he was not going to stay there, like a fly in a spider's web. Something must be done, and that quickly. Fred took a hasty survey of the situation.

The rock-bound nook in which he stood had perpendicular walls, which rose to from ten to twenty feet in height. They were far too smooth to climb. It was a natural alcove, only broken by the narrow entrance in its front.

In the rear the sides of the alcove came closer together, and were succeeded by a crack that ran far back into the rock. At this point the wall was over twenty feet in height.

Fred looked around him in disgust. His eyes surveyed this crevice.

"I might do it," he muttered, "but— S'pose I try the front, anyhow. Abe must be too far off for good pistol practice. Out of sight, likely enough."

He hurried to the opening and looked impulsively out, but drew back quick as lightning, for his keen eyes had caught a sharp flash, and he was just in time to escape a bullet that came with a sharp *ping!* against the rock.

"Keep yer nose in cover," came in Abe's harsh voice. "I'm on guard outside, and don't intend to slide till the patrol comes round."

"I believe you lie, Abe," said Fred to himself. "You're trying to scare me, so you can vamose. That's my notion, anyhow; but you're so rascally quick on the trigger that it ain't safe to test my idea. Got to play some other game, or else throw up my hand."

He looked back again to the spot where the walls came within two feet of each other.

"Somehow it seems to me I can shin that," he muttered. "I've gone up worse climbs at school."

No sooner said than done. He stationed him-

self between the two vertical rock faces, which were close enough together to give him a purchase of hands and feet. Pressing against the two sides with arms and legs he began to climb, hand over hand.

The task was no very difficult one while the rock faces were close together. The young acrobat mounted rapidly. But higher up they flared apart, until he gained a point where they were nearly three feet separate. Climbing now was no easy matter. The full stretch of his arms barely reached from rock to rock, and he could get little purchase. His feet had better hold, however and he still went up inch by inch.

Finally he reached an altitude from which no further progress could be made. His outstretched arms just reached the opposite rocks. He was within a foot or two of the summit on one side, but it seemed impossible to go an inch further.

"Have I got to flop together and drop back?" asked Fred, desperately. "Won't do it without one jump for life anyhow."

His feet still had some purchase, enough to aid him in a spring upward. It was a desperate venture, for a failure meant a tumble of twenty feet on a rock bottom. But Fred hated like fury to be beaten, and he took the chances. Stooping so as to bend his knees, he sprang upward with all his strength, throwing his body to the side where the wall was lowest.

His spring took him a foot upward. His grasping fingers caught at the top of the wall; but failed. Was it all over? Would he drop back, mayhap to his death? No. His hands caught in a narrow crevice in the stone. He clung on with a death grip. He had missed the top by six inches.

Fred hung for a couple of minutes, clinging with his fingers, and lying against the slightly sloping rock. Then with a desperate lift he drew himself slightly upward. One hand sufficed to hold, while he clutched upward with the other.

Fortune favored him. He had caught the sharp edge of the rock. In a moment more both hands had a firm hold. He drew himself up until his head was on a level with the summit of the rock wall.

The daring young scout took a long look ahead over the summit. The rock shelved away so that he was able to see the mountain level at some distance ahead.

And there, to his delight, appeared the form of Abe Blizzard, at a distance of several hundred yards. The redoubtable outlaw was slowly retreating, with his eyes turned back, as if eager to give the young prisoner another warning.

In Fred's present position he was invisible to the outlaw. But he dared not climb higher, as he would thus be brought again into full sight.

The situation was yet no sinecure. He had to support his whole weight on his fingers, and they were just growing weary with the effort. Abe moved very slowly, while the boy gritted his teeth in desperation.

"If he'd only go faster! A minute more of this, and down I go."

He sought to get a foothold for his feet on the smooth rock, but in vain. His body sunk down

until his eyes were below the rock level. His finger-hold began to slip.

"A chap might as well die by lead as stone," he cried, savagely. "Here goes, and deuce take Abe's revolver."

He jerked himself up with a desperate effort. Several inches were gained, and he got a safer hold. Another jerk. His scraping foot fortunately found a slight crevice. This was enough for the agile boy. In an instant more he was on the summit of the rock, where he flung himself prostrate. Abe, fortunately, was just then looking ahead.

Fred found himself on the top of a slender rock buttress, that sloped downward on all sides around him, except to the rear, where it joined on to the higher range of the mountain. To the right was a level range of rock, running off for some distance. To the left all was jagged and broken, with trees and bushes at every available point.

Abe was retreating to the right, his wary eyes noting every point of the scene as he did so. All at once Fred noticed him to slightly start, and then hastily dart forward to the shelter of a protruding boulder. He had been looking down the mountain at the moment. The young spy turned his eyes in the same direction, and in an instant saw the cause of the outlaw's hasty movement.

There was a rustle in some bushes below, and then a head appeared. It was the shaggy poll of Elick Branson.

Fred lay cogitating. What should he do? Here came the mountaineer. But he had not seen the game, and was climbing but slowly. Ten or fifteen minutes would elapse before his appearance, and minutes now counted.

"Abe Blizzard's a sharp one, but he isn't the only razor edge in the mountains," declared Fred. "He's playing a blind on me. That slide off to the right means that he's going to hole to the left. If I can only get an eye on him again."

But how to post Elick? His aid might yet be needed. A moment's reflection, then Fred took a note-book from his pocket, tore out a leaf, and hastily scribbled some words on it. Then he placed his cap on a slender, upright stone, with the white paper stuck in its band.

"He'll see that. Mountain post. Item for *Rockside Star*. Now to ambush old Abe!"

The agile youth made his way back from the narrow shelf on which he lay to the wider brow of the buttress beyond. Back he went until he had gained the mountain face again. It was here broken and rugged, and travel was no easy matter. Fred made his way slowly to the westward, the direction which he was sure the outlaw would soon take.

It was no easy passage. Boulders obstructed the way. Here and there deep crevices cut far into it. No path had been made by careful pioneers. It was all in the wild ruggedness of nature. Here a leap was necessary. There a hard climb. Yonder a descent into a ravine and a mount up its opposite side. Again a forcible passage through a clump of bushes, where a patch of soil permitted their growth.

He had thus made his way for a quarter of a mile over the rocks. Nothing was yet visible

of his game. But in that rough region it was impossible to get a clear outlook a hundred yards ahead.

One thing Fred took care to do, to disarrange and break the bushes he passed through. It might be well to leave a trail for Elick. There was no knowing what dangers yet lay before him.

Fred checked himself and hastily stooped. That was surely a foxskin cap on a shaggy head! But it was not Abe Blizzard's brain-pan. Others of the outlaws were abroad. The scent was growing warm.

He keenly observed the head, of which only the upper portion had become visible, among the broken rocks beyond. It was but a glimpse. In a moment it disappeared.

"There's my guide, by all that's lucky, if I can only keep him in sight," declared Fred, as he dashed hastily forward, without regard to his shins.

This onrush soon brought him to an impassable locality. He found himself on the edge of a deep ravine that cut downward to a depth of twenty or thirty feet in the rock, its sides nearly perpendicular. It could be seen running up and down the mountain for a considerable distance in each direction.

What had become of the man he had seen? He had certainly been this side of the ravine. He could not have crossed it at this point. Yet he was not visible above or below.

Fred stood on its edge, putting this and that together. It could not be far from here where he had wrestled with one of the outlaws the day he got shot. Could there be any hiding-place? The current of his thoughts was broken by something familiar in the locality. He had certainly seen that mountain channel before. Recollection came back to him. It was the same ravine up whose bed he had made his way in pursuit of Abe Blizzard on the day of the great hunt.

"By thunder!" exclaimed Fred, "I wonder if I flew the track too soon that day? There's a fox-hole somewhere about here, and it might be about this rock-spilt. Let me see. I was stopped by a stream of water that came sliding down and filling up the whole opening. And there it is now."

He could see the glint of the shooting water, in the dark bed of the ravine, some short distance ahead.

Was that the head of the channel, or did it go further back? Was there a descent into its depths beyond the point where he had been checked before? It was worth an investigation.

He followed upward along the edge of the crevice. It rapidly narrowed as he advanced, until it was not ten feet across. Looking down into its bed he could see just below him the sliding stream which had stopped his progress on that former occasion.

He continued upward. The ravine grew still narrower. Its bottom seemed but a line, and appeared to rise. Soon the opening became a mere crack in the rocks, of some ten feet in depth and an equal width, while at the bottom it narrowed to a crevice.

"There's one mighty queer point about this," said Fred to himself, as he stood looking down

the ravine. "What's become of the water? That's a lively little stream below. But it's as dry as a chip up here. Where does that stream come from? Rock's one thing, and water's another, and nobody ever knew of one turning into the other. But that rattling little brook comes from somewhere. If it don't come over the rock, it stands to reason it must come out of the rock."

Fred scratched his head. He had a decided idea. Was he on the track of a discovery? At any rate here was a natural curiosity that was worth investigating.

He proceeded some distance further, to where the ravine almost came together at top. Here he sprung across it, and proceeded down the other side. He had not forgotten the path on this side, by which he had got out of the ravine on that former occasion. His notion now was to follow the same path back into its depths.

He was not long in finding the narrow and slippery shelving path, not six inches wide. Down it he went, slipping and sliding. A minute or two brought him to the bottom of the ravine.

Here all was dark and damp. The stream ran purling downward. Just in front it slid through its narrow channel, down the sloping rock, filling the whole space to a foot in depth.

There was a wade here, and a heavy one, against the force of that rapid. But that was what Fred was here for. He was bound to carry out his plan, wet or not. He might find a mere rock spring; or he might find—who could tell what?

Setting his teeth he trod into the stream and pushed his way upward. It was no easy journey. The water came down with considerable pressure. It grew darker and narrower at every step. The rock sides approached until there was barely room for his body to pass through. A chill set through his bones as the cold water bathed his limbs.

Yet on he pushed, step by step, bound to proceed as far as possible.

He had thus gained about twenty feet of progress. It seemed almost useless to venture further, yet he persisted. The slope down which the waters rushed now became more of a level. It soon became quite level, and he found himself standing in a shallow pool, at the head of the rapid.

It was almost dark here. The passage had widened. He groped forward. A few steps and it became quite dark, except for the dim rays of light down the channel.

The passage was wider. He could not touch its sides with his outstretched hands. The stream narrowed again. He stood on dry rock at its side. Above him was a dark wall of rock. Had he entered a cavern?

Suddenly there came to his ears a hollow and startling sound, that made him draw back and crouch down in involuntary fear.

CHAPTER XI.

FRED SCARED BY A SPECTER.

"SWEAR I see'd a summat movin' up here-away. But whether it were a varmint or a human ain't inside my category."

These words were spoken by Elick Branson,

who had now gained the level where the events just described had taken place. He stood and looked around him, with the experienced eye of an old hunter. He knew the spot well, and had been more than once in the peculiar nook where Fred had taken his lunch. He was about to step forward and explore it, when something odd at the surface of the rock caught his eye.

In a flash the rifle was at his shoulder, with a quick aim at the suspicious object.

"Hold yer level, boss, or I'll bore ye. Want to have an interview— Great Jerusha, it's only a blind! Somebody's head-cover stuck on a stone. Who's been browsin' round here?"

There was one way to tell. The rock was steep, but he was not long in climbing to its summit.

"As I'm a livin' sinner, it's the boy's head-riggin'? Stuck on a stone, and with a bit o' white paper fur a signal! Blast my old eyes, if there ain't somethin' back o' all this!"

Before examining the cap he took a cautious look over the surroundings. From that elevated point a considerable range of sight was available. But nothing living appeared. All was still and noiseless, save the faint rustle of leaves before the light wind.

"Not a rat stirrin'. But there was summat up here ten minutes back. Wonder if anything ugly is come to the lad?"

He grasped Fred's cap, and took the white paper from its band. Before opening this he examined the cap closely to see if it conveyed any other intelligence.

"He ain't swapped his head fur a stone out o' fun," was the muttered comment. "Let's see what's ahind it all. Bet the boy's smelt 'possum."

He opened the paper and read its contents, while a grim smile curled his grizzled lips.

"I am on Abe's trail," ran the document. "See you coming, but haven't time to wait. He has just turned the corner of the big rock to the right. I'm off over the rough track to the left. Can't tell you what to do, for I don't know. Use your wits. Bet we're not far from the rat-trap. FRED FLYER."

"Looks as if there was summat in the wind, anyhow," declared Elick. "So Abe's about, hey? That's fun."

He leaned on his rifle, and reflected what movement was best to take, whether to follow the boy or the outlaw.

"I ain't afeard but he'll do his sheer o' the job judgmatical," he considered. "That boy's no slouch o' a mountaineer. But two heads is better nor one, and a double trail better nor a single. Guess I'll try and track Abe."

The big rock to which Fred referred was unmistakable. There it lay, a quarter of a mile off to the right. He scrambled down the steep slope, and made his way toward it.

Turning its flank, a practicable pass up the mountain was visible. It was all hard rock hereabout, and no chance of discovering a trail. But there was only the one pass. He trudged up it.

It opened out upon a broad shelf, that ran off right and left, well covered with trees, which found here a good patch of soil. There were grass and dead leaves on the ground,

The sharp eyes of the hunter observed these heedfully.

Yes, there it was! The unmistakable track of a human foot. And another! It was Abe Blizzard's trail! It ran off to the west, the direction in which Fred had gone.

"Good as wheat!" Elick ejaculated. "Why, the lad's a reg'lar little steel-trap. He's smelt out the whole game, and put out to head Abe off. I'll foller the trail."

It was no difficult matter. The leaves had been moistened by a recent rain, and readily took the impressions of footsteps. The old hunter made his way rapidly forward, as confidently as if he saw his prey before him.

It was a charming scene. The dark leaves of pines and oaks intertwined above, only letting the sunlight down in patches. Through the tree-trunks was visible the long down-slope of the mountain, and far off the valley, with its glinting stream, and the town of Oxford plainly in view. The air had the fresh feel of mid-October.

But little heeded Elick all this. He had but one thought in his mind, to follow those leaf-tracks to their destination.

Unluckily the wood quickly ended. He had reached that rugged locality into which Fred had penetrated. There was nothing here but rough and broken rocks, crevices, ravines, steep slopes, and sheer descents. The trail was lost. Only hammer and chisel could have made a track there.

"I'll sw'ar I'm not far from the mark," growled the hunter, after ten minutes' blind search of the locality. "The hidin'-place is somewhar in this rough lot. But whar the blazin' blue-lights it is I guv up. Been over this ground fifty times afore, and ain't seen a rat-hole."

The time of the search stretched out to a half-hour, but without result. The lost trail was not recovered. No trace of living being was visible. All around spread the broken ground, as if it had been torn by an earthquake.

"It's like hunting the needle in the haystack," he growled. "Wonder if the boy's had better luck? Mebbe I'd best go back and take up his trail. Mought be an easier one to foller than Abe's."

This idea was quickly put into effect. He made his way southward toward the rock buttress. Ere reaching it, however, he found himself near a clump of bushes, in which his experienced eye saw traces of a recent disturbance. He moved up for a closer examination.

"Looks as if a deer, with full antlers, had gone through 'em. They're powerful thrashed. But—ha! I thought so. That's been done a purpose. The lad's been through here, sure as shootin', and he's ripped the bushes to blaze his track."

It was no difficult matter to follow Fred's trail. He had taken good care to make it plain enough. It was not many minutes ere Elick stood on the brink of the deep ravine, at nearly the same spot at which the boy had reached it.

He stopped here thoughtfully. It was impossible to descend into the cavity at this point,

The boy must have gone up or down its banks. The hunter stood irresolute, looking for something to guide his next movements.

As he did so his quick eyes caught sight of some moving object beyond the ravine. What it was he could not make out, whether living being or something moved by the wind. He crouched hastily down and sought cover, from which to observe unseen this suspicious object.

But we must leave him and return to his fellow-scout, whom we deserted in a ticklish situation. He had just crouched back against the rock, startled by a strange sound, that rose in hollow accents over the rushing noise of the rapid.

It seemed to come from down the stream. But in a second it was repeated, this time seemingly from within the heart of the rock. It was a sort of deep sigh or groan, that rolled in hollow rumblings through the cavernous depths.

What was it? He could not imagine. He continued to crouch in a crevice of the rock wall, with a feeling of awe. To his excited fancy it seemed as if this was something supernatural.

It was repeated, now almost at his ear, and the faint light that came up the stream was darkened, as if by some obstruction. While he continued to crouch, in dread and wonder, there came a splash in the water close by, and something seemed to stand on the rock at his side.

Fred crouched lower, while his hair rose in superstitious awe. The thing, whatever it was, halted there. He could have touched it with an outstretched hand. Its deep breathing was audible.

An instant only, then it moved onward. There was the sound of footsteps. Fred's wits began to return to him.

Ghosts don't wear boots, and don't breathe quite as loud as a bear. It was no specter that had passed him, but a human being, and the startling sounds he had heard might be some sort of a signal. It was the echoing depth of the cave that had given it such a hollow, nerve-shaking tone.

Here was something, at any rate, worth testing. The boy's spirits rose as much as they had been depressed. He sprang lightly out from the crevice into which he had squeezed himself, and began to follow the advancing figure into the depths of the darkness before him.

The gloom soon became utter blackness. He could hear the stream flowing beside him. On the other side was the rock wall, which he touched at every instant. The two served as guides. Before him the sound of footsteps was still to be heard. Fred trod lightly in pursuit.

Now a flash of light in front broke on the thick gloom. He could see that he was in a low and narrow passage, that appeared to widen in advance. Tones of voices came to his ears.

He reached a spot at which the opening suddenly broadened. From an avenue it had become a cave.

Fred hung back. His quick glance had revealed two men to his eyes, one of them holding a lamp, from which came the illumination of the cave. The man who stood before the lamp-holder, he

who had just entered, Fred needed no second look to recognize. It was Abe Blizzard, the leader of the outlaws.

The secret was out. This was the hiding-place of the runaway convicts. From here they issued on their plundering raids. Within this well-concealed covert they laughed at the authorities and defied pursuit. Here they had brought their helpless captive.

A thousand quick thoughts rushed through the boy's mind. What should he do—withdraw and lead a party to the cave, or take the risk and penetrate in search of the prisoner himself?

His adventurous spirit incited to the latter course. And the glory and credit of making the rescue without aid was not to be despised.

While revolving these thoughts he was listening to the conversation of the two men. It might aid in forming his resolution.

"What's the outlook, Abe? The coast clear?"

"No," answered Abe, with a harsh oath. "That confounded boy's nosing around. And Elick Branson's out. Guess I've settled fur the boy. Skeered him out o' a week's growth with a bullet. But old Elick's dangerous. We'll have to keep in quarters."

"Why didn't you bu'st the boy's b'iler?"

"Didn't want to hurt the baby. I kinder like the chap, anyway. And skeerin' a rabbit's as good as skinnin' it."

The contempt of this tone settled Fred. His mind was made up now. There was no more thought of backing out. He would show Abe Blizzard if he was a baby or a scary rabbit.

"How 'bout the gal?" continued Abe. "Playin' ugly yit? Won't eat her grub, won't she? Wonder if she's 'feared of bein' p'isened?"

"Dunno," answered the other. "She's sort o' dazed. Just moaned and cried away one whole day, as if she was going to turn to water, and all run out at her eyes. But she's got a stiffer lip to-day. Don't say nothin', but glares like a tiger-cat."

"She'll come round," said Abe, indifferently. "They allers go through them queers. Don't want to hurt or fright the gal. It's her dad I'm tryin' to skeer. Maybe I'd best go smooth her down a bit."

He made a step toward the left side of the cave. Fred's lurking eyes gazed in that direction; and caught sight of a door set in the rugged rock.

"Yes, you'll smooth her, with the fur rubbed the wrong way," growled the other. "You'll jist waste yer powder, Abe. Let her alone. She'll come round herself."

"Guess that's sound logic," answered Abe, turning back. "I'm kinder wolfish, Joe. Calculate I'll take some grub. No more of the boys out?"

"No. Silas jist took a peep out, but he's back ag'in."

They walked further into the cave while speaking. Fred watched them until they disappeared around a rock projection. The stream turned at this point, and ran at a different angle.

Yet though the lamp was removed the cave was not quite dark. A faint light came from

the left, where he had seen the door. There seemed to be a light behind this portal.

Fred hesitated, and reflected long before making his next move. It was not easy to decide what action to take. He ended by boldly advancing toward the point where the outlaws had disappeared. It was wisest to study the situation before plunging into peril.

As he had imagined, the stream curved here, and the swelling cavern grew narrow again. It became but a passage, dimly lit from beyond. After a few steps, however, it widened again into an apartment of some twenty feet diameter and ten feet high, and of unknown depth, though it seemed to narrow again in the distance.

This part of the cave was rudely furnished. In its center was a table, around which a group of men were seated. The new-comers had just joined them. Loud voices and hoarse laughs came from the rough crew.

Fred drew cautiously back. He had seen enough. By good fortune the prison of the captive was in the outer cave. Or at least he imagined so, and it remained to test this belief.

He quickly made his way to the rough oaken door, from above and below which came the rays of light.

He listened. All was deathly silent within. He tried the door. It was firmly locked. At the sound he heard a stir within. He flung himself on the rock floor, so as to get his lips to the opening beneath the door.

"Hist!" he cautiously cried. "Are you there, Minnie—Miss Allen?"

There came a kind of rushing sound, and then a voice full of suppressed excitement.

"Who calls? Oh! is that a friendly voice?"

"Be cautious. It is I, Fred Flyer. I am here to rescue you. But—"

"Oh! quick, quick! I shall go mad in here!"

"Hush! I hear steps!"

He hastily turned. Steps indeed were coming from the inner cave. The light of a lamp glared ahead. Discovery seemed certain. There was no time to seek his former cover.

CHAPTER XII.

A DASH FOR LIBERTY.

WE left Elick Branson on the brink of the ravine, crouched behind a covering rock, his rifle advanced, a finger on the trigger, cautiously waiting the next move of the object he had seen beyond.

Soon it emerged into view from behind the screen of bushes, and took the form of a man. Like a flash the old hunter was on his feet, and with a deadly aim on the unconscious stranger.

"Halt there!" he commanded, sternly. "I've got you under the nose of a bullet, my chap. Cut up any cantikoes and I'll guv you a taste of the leaden toothache. Jist trot up here to the edge o' the cut. I want to twig yer phisiog closer."

The stranger, utterly taken by surprise, hesitated for a minute. But Elick's renewed threat brought him forward. The old hunter glanced at the face now clearly revealed to him, and then dropped his rifle with an oath of vexation.

"Hang it all, it's only Jake Primrose! And I

thought I had one of the jail-birds nailed. What the blazes fetches you here?"

"Hello, Ellick!" returned the other. "Jupiter, old boy, you scared me out of a week's appetite. There's a party of us up here, scouting round. Thought we'd try again to bag the rabbits."

"There is, hey? Where are they?"

"Oh, scattering. Some here, some there. Taking a general hunt."

"And mighty likely to find somethin' where old scouts have failed," was the contemptuous answer. "S'pose they're out fur exercise. Arter an appetite fur supper. But I'll tell you one thing. The job's warm. We're not fur off from the rascals. Who's headin' the crowd?"

"Judge Allen."

"Then I want a confab with the jedge. Mebbe you kin p'int out his whereabouts."

"He's off somewhere behind you, with the main body. They're taking a rest, while some of us are on the hunt."

"Clever logic. Here's fur the jedge."

He shouldered his rifle and turned back, making his way toward the open ground that lay off to the east.

Here was what might prove a fortunate circumstance for the young scout within the cave. Friends were at hand if he could but get the captive out. But how was that to be done?

He had been surprised during his conversation with her by the gleam of a light and the sound of approaching footsteps. What was to be done? He looked eagerly round. It was impossible to gain the cave entrance without discovery. There was no other visible hiding-place. Was he, after all his efforts, to fall into the hands of the outlaws, and become a second prisoner?

There was nothing for it but to take the chances. The lamp in the hands of the coming person gave no brilliant light. His clothes were dark. There was yet a forlorn hope.

All this had passed like a flash through Fred's active brain. Not a second was to spare. With a low warning to the captive he darted away to the rear of the cave, and flung himself prostrate on the ground, in the angle made by the floor and the wall.

If the new-comer should turn his eyes that way all was lost. The chances were but one in fifty. But it was not the first time that Fred Flyer had speculated high on a slim chance.

Hardly had the fugitive taken his position, when the cave was illuminated by the lamp of the approaching outlaw. This was a raw-boned, harsh-faced fellow, with an evil look in his twinkling eye. Fred clung to the wall as if he formed part of it.

Fortunately for him there was no suspicion in the mind of the outlaw. He walked steadily toward the cave without turning his eye to right or left.

"Don't be skeered inside there," he said, with an effort to soften his voice. "I've jist come to put some 'ile in yer lamp. Don't want to leave you in the dark, 'mong the ghosts." He laughed hoarsely as he placed his lamp on the floor, and extracted a key from his pocket.

Fred had his eye on the fellow, as he listened intently to this conversation. In a minute more

the door of the cell was opened and the outlaw entered, leaving his lamp outside.

The scout crawled nearer. He heard some words of conversation from the cell, the soft, sweet tones of the captive mingled with the hoarse ones of the jailer.

"Don't be skeered, little 'un," said the latter, in a voice that made some effort to be gentle. "Nobody here ain't goin' to hurt you. We'll send you safe home again as soon as yer dad, the jedge, comes to tarms. There, drat it, I didn't come none too soon. The lamp's burnt out. 'Tain't no odds, though. Got another 'un settin' outside. Guv you that, I guess."

His feet could be heard moving toward the door. But ere he could reach it, there came a rushing sound, and in an instant all was blank darkness. The lamp had been extinguished.

"The hound take the luck!" growled the outlaw. "That's one of them rascally bats. I'd like to smash the caboodle of 'em. Never mind, gal. I'll fotch you another lamp in a jiffy. Jist lock you in, though, while I'm arter it, 'cause that's Abe's orders."

He could be heard groping out of the cell. Then came the closing of the door, and the click of the turning key. But mingled with this was another faint swishing sound, as if bats were indeed flying about the cave.

The outlaw recovered his overturned lamp, and stalked off to the point where a very faint illumination revealed the passage leading to the inner cave.

His steps were no sooner within it than Fred was at the door. He tried the lock hastily, with a groan of dismay on discovering that it was really fastened.

"Oh, Minnie!" he cried, in suppressed tones. "It is tight locked. Oh, if you were only outside now!"

He started as if he had been shot when the reply came in a soft voice at his very ear.

"So I am outside," it said. "I knew you were here, and I slipped out ahead of him. Oh, Fred, can we not escape? Thank that fortunate bat."

"Guess I was the bat that kicked over that lamp," laughed Fred. "There's only your sharp wit to thank, for slipping out so cutely. Where are you? There is not a second to lose."

He stretched out his hand in the darkness. They encountered soft fingers that sent a thrill of new sensation through his veins. He drew her to him, holding one hand in his, while he placed his other arm round the slender waist.

"Excuse me," he murmured. "I must guide and support you. Quick, Minnie. Keep up your spirits and we are safe."

He ran across the floor of the cave, half-carrying her in his haste. The gloom was intense, yet Fred knew precisely what he was about. He remembered the general direction from the cell to the cave entrance, while the faint gleam in the rear served as a surer guide. The prattle of the flowing waters also helped to direct his footsteps.

In less than a minute he found himself within the narrow entrance passage, with the wall to his right, and the stream to his left. Far, seemingly very far, in advance, was visible a dim gleam of light.

"It is the blessed daylight, Minnie," he whispered. "Keep up your courage, and we will soon be out."

"I fear nothing with you, Fred," she murmured in return, in a tone that thrilled his heart with delight.

She yielded to his embracing arm, indeed, as if she liked it quite as much as he did, and Fred would have been content to stand there in that warm gloom for untold minutes more, but that the footsteps of the returning robber warned him that haste was now highly expedient.

"Come, Minnie! Quick!"

He hastened onward as rapidly as possible, feeling his way at every step. They turned a slight curve, and the light ahead grew stronger. A few steps more, and the sound of the flowing brook rose into a loud murmur. It was the voice of the rapid, just in advance.

"We have to take to the water," he whispered. "You will get very wet. Perhaps I had better carry you."

"I have no doubt you would like to," she answered, with a sly laugh; "but I fear that would not be very safe, just now. I have had my feet wet before, and don't mind that."

"You don't know how deep it is. You will be wet to the knees."

"No matter. Come."

At this instant there sounded a loud cry in the cave behind them, coming to their ears in hollow reverberations like those that had startled Fred before. Evidently the flight was discovered. This was the jailer's cry of alarm. In a minute more all the outlaws would be on the move, and the pursuit begun.

The startled fugitives sprang quickly into the stream and hastened forward. A very few steps brought them to the head of the rapid. The fierce gurgle of its rushing waters filled the air. The light ahead grew stronger at every step.

Down the rapid they hastened as rapidly as was safe to prevent stumbling and falling in the swift rush.

Fred clasped her more firmly with his strong arm and half-carried her, as he set his feet strongly, one after another, on the rocky bottom.

On, step by step. A glow of sunlight lighted the sides of the ravine ahead. They were at the bottom of the rapid, drenched and shivering, yet safely in the outer world.

And from the cave behind came an odd roar. The outlaws were evidently yelling with rage. They would be dashing on in pursuit in an instant more.

Down the bottom of the ravine fled the fugitives. They were quickly at the foot of the path which led up its sides. This was evidently impassable to Minnie's untrained feet, but—a thought came to Fred.

"I have it!" he cried. "You hurry on down the ravine, and hide somewhere below. I will climb this path and draw them off. You can escape while they are chasing me."

"But you? They are furious. They may—"

"Don't mind me. Run! Quick! I can take care of myself."

He gave her an impulsive push forward, and himself turned and hurried up the narrow path.

Minnie looked after him in a moment's doubt, a glance of warm concern in her eyes. She then hurried forward, as Fred had ordered.

The winding ravine, and the rocks that strewed its bottom, soon concealed her from view. Fred dashed up the path with impetuous haste. He had gained the summit of the rock, and was looking down into the gloomy depth of the ravine, when the foremost pursuer broke into view. It was the well-remembered form of Abe Blizzard.

The outlaw gazed up, and an oath of dire intent came from his grizzled lips as he caught sight of Fred's face.

"It's you, young catamount, is it?" he yelled. "By the eternal, I'll have the gal ag'in, and cure you of meddlin'!"

He rushed for the path, followed with fierce oaths by the others.

Fred dashed away, firing a load from his revolver as he did so. He had cunningly drawn them off from pursuit of Minnie. But he had himself to look after now. They might murder him in their fury. Elick Branson must be near at hand. A pistol-shot might bring him to the rescue.

Fred hastened up the side of the ravine, and sprang across it at its narrow portion above. He now fled back among the broken rocks to the right. He looked behind him on gaining shelter. There was the whole outlaw gang in full chase. They caught a glimpse of his head, and yelled in triumphant fury, as they dashed forward.

It was a desperate effort. Fred was young and agile. But the path was a difficult one. He had only once traversed it, while it must be familiar to the pursuers.

He fired his pistol again as he pushed onward. A sight of old Elick's homely but honest face just now would be worth so much gold-dust. Over rock, through bush, across crevice, up and down hill. Five minutes and he dashed from the rock labyrinth into the open space beyond.

With a yell of triumph the outlaws broke out behind him, not ten paces in his rear. There was a hasty stop and recoil. For there before them, drawn up in line, were at least twenty armed men, who returned the cry of the outlaws with a shout of equal triumph. Fred stood between the two opposing forces, to all appearance the leader of the outlaw gang. It was a decidedly unexpected situation.

CHAPTER XIII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

CRACK! crack! crack! came the rattle of pistols and rifle-shots. Both parties fired wildly, the outlaws in retreating, the townsmen in advancing. And Fred stood between, a target for the bullets of both parties.

He had wit enough, however, to fling himself to the ground, out of bullet range, and to crawl hastily back to the shelter of the rocks behind him.

The next minute the armed party came dashing wildly on, yelling with excitement.

"After them, lads! Don't let a soul escape! We have them now! Snatch that boy, somebody. He's the leader of the gang. Where are you, Jerry? He's your game."

Fred found himself in the strong hands of the irate constable, who grasped his collar with a vigorous clutch.

"You're my meat, little foxy. I bet a cat's paw you don't get off so easy this time. Come ahead, you wood rat. I want to see this fun out."

Fred made no resistance. In fact he had got his work in, and had no reason to fear evil consequences. The rush after the escaping outlaws went on, with shouts and shots, and many an ugly tumble on the rough ground they traversed.

The outlaws made no resistance. Their sole object seemed to be to escape. But soon a diversion took place. Shots were heard from the other side. Excited cries came from the direction of the ravine. Evidently the men who had been out scouting in that direction had taken the cue, and were hurrying up to the conflict. The outlaw band was between two fires.

"On them, my merry boys!" came the cheery voice of Judge Allen. "Don't let one escape. They are in a tight trap."

"Pile up, lovelies!" came Elick Branson's voice from the other side. "Squeeze 'em! Stretch out, lads, right and left. We've got 'em where the hair's short."

There came a change in the game. The fugitives halted in their wild flight, and dropped behind the sheltering rocks, from which came the spiteful patter of pistol-shots. They had taken in the peril of the situation and made up their minds to fight for liberty.

It was no agreeable business. The boulders that were strewn thickly around afforded plentiful shelter, and it might not prove easy to dislodge the ambushed outlaws. The first discharge had wounded several of the pursuing party. The others dropped back under shelter and returned the fire. But it was now a sheer waste of powder. They were firing at stone walls.

"Spread out yer line!" came the shrill voice of the old hunter. "Surround the bloody runaways! Close in on 'em. And stop shootin', dang ye! We want 'em alive, not dead."

This advice was good. Judge Allen repeated the order on his side. The party pushed forward on its flanks, to meet the others, and form a living ring around the inclosed outlaws.

The latter saw their danger, and made a wild rush to escape from the inclosing ring. In this two or three succeeded, but the remainder found themselves confronted by stern faces and leveled rifles.

"Surrender, you dirty dogs! Guv up, or it'll be wuss for you. 'Tain't no baby play this time, blast yer eyes!"

As Elick shouted this he grasped one of the fugitives by the collar, and sent him back with a fierce jerk.

"Snatch that parsnip, some o' you!" he yelled, as he hurried forward among the dismayed outlaws, who in their panic had given up all thought of resistance.

"Where's Abe Blizzard? Where's the ring-leader of the gang?"

"Here he is! D'ye want him? Take him, then!"

The burly reprobate dashed suddenly forward from his shelter, knocked down the two men before him with a double thrust of his brawny fists, and burst through the inclosing ring.

"Here's Abe Blizzard! Take him!"

The bold fellow had sprung to the surface of a tall rock, and waved his hat in triumph as he prepared to dash onward.

But he was within an inch of death at that moment. Jerry, the constable, had sprung up in excited fury, rifle at shoulder, and now covered the fugitive with a deadly aim.

"Surrender! Or you're a dead man!"

"Never!"

"Then take it!"

He pressed his finger on the trigger. All eyes looked to see the outlaw fall, for Jerry was a noted marksman. But at the same instant a slender, youthful figure sprung up beside him, and struck up the muzzle of the rifle. It was just in time. The bullet whizzed not two inches above Abe's head.

"Good for you, boy!" cried the daring outlaw.

"I won't forget it."

He sprung from his perch, and in a moment was lost to view.

While several of the party dashed forward on his track, Jerry turned in a rage to his prisoner, who had thus saved the outlaw's life.

"Hang your ugly young picture! What did you do that for?" He caught Fred's collar with an angry clutch.

"To keep you from committing murder," answered Fred, with an unflinching look. "Did you think that was a wild duck, or a rabbit? 'Tain't the thing, nowadays, to make targets of men, you sour-faced galoot! Let go my collar."

"I'll shake the fun out of you, if I hear more slack from your impudent tongue."

"You will, eh?" In an instant, Fred, by some wiry twist was free from his grasp. "Now keep your distance, or I'll give you a boy's lesson." Fred's pistol was in his hand, and a look in his eye that made his captor hastily draw back. "Where's Judge Allen? I must speak to him this instant."

"I am here, boy. What do you want? Be quick, for I have no time to waste on you. You are a prisoner, you must understand that. You led that gang to the attack on us. I know you now in your true colors, as a spy and a robber, though I am sorry to see one so young in such a bad trade."

"I led them?" answered Fred with surprise. A short laugh of amusement broke from his lips. "A queer sort of leading. Why, judge, they were after me like cows after parsnips."

"You bet on that," growled one of the prisoners. "We wouldn't be fools enough to guv ourselves up, only fur chasin' that squib of a sky-rocket boy."

The judge looked from one to the other, and then shook his head in doubt.

"That story won't do. The thing was too evident. Give yourself up, boy. You are arrested for being concerned in that store robbery, and for aiding and abetting these outlaws."

"There is one thing you forget, Judge Allen."

"What is that?"

"You forget what brought you here. The rescue of your daughter from these men."

"Oh, can you lead me to her?" cried the judge, with a sudden change of tone. There was an accent of anguish in his voice. "I can forgive you everything if you but give me back my stolen daughter!"

"She is safe," answered Fred, with sympathy. "I have just rescued her. That is why I was pursued. She took another course, and they followed me. Come, I will lead you to her."

The judge sprang eagerly forward.

"Oh! if this is the truth I shall reward you nobly! Quick! Lead me to her!" He turned to the listening men. "You know what to do. Secure your prisoners, and remove them. The others cannot escape. Elick is leading his men in hot pursuit. Come on, boy. And you, Jerry. This young fellow remains your prisoner till he has proved his words."

A smile was on Fred's lips as he led briskly onward, followed closely by the judge and the constable. He calculated on very quickly getting out of the difficulty into which circumstances had thrown him.

A few minutes sufficed to bring them to the brink of the ravine.

"It was down this way I escaped with Minnie Allen, your daughter," explained Fred. "I climbed to the top, while she went on down the hollow. This way. We will find her somewhere below here."

He led the way down the brink. The bottom lay plainly revealed to their eyes. Yet though they walked for a considerable distance, no trace of the escaped girl was visible. Finally they reached the mouth of the ravine, which opened out on a precipice. The stream escaped through a side creek. No living thing was within view.

The judge turned with stern suspicion to the perplexed guide.

"Have you been deceiving me?" he angrily demanded. "By my life, if it proves so it will go hard with you. I could forgive anything rather than that."

"As I am a living boy I left her in this hollow!" protested Fred. "I cannot imagine what has become of her. It may be that some of the outlaws recaptured her and took her back to the cave."

"The cave? What cave?"

"The hiding-place of the outlaws. I have discovered it. It lies at the head of this ravine. It was from there I rescued your daughter. She may be back there again. Follow, and I will prove my words."

At this point descent into the ravine was easy. The two men followed Fred, curiously but suspiciously. It was evident they feared some scheme to escape, and Jerry kept very close to his prisoner guide.

Up the bottom of the ravine they climbed. Nothing to indicate the late presence of the fugitive was discovered. In a few minutes they stood at the foot of the shooting rapid, that so cleverly masked the entrance to the cave.

"Now, gentlemen, you must prepare for a wade," said Fred decidedly.

"Through that water?"

"Just so. That is the path to the robbers' den."

The judge hung back in surprise and alarm.

"That cannot be! The stream comes from a spring!"

"Do you suppose these men could have hidden from Elick Branson's sharp eyes if they'd had any common hiding-place? I tell you this is the path to the cave. Follow me, if you are not afraid."

"Afraid, boy? Lead on!"

Fred plunged into the shooting water. He was followed by his two companions. To their utter astonishment they found his words to be true. A few minutes brought them within the cavern. The lamp which had been recently brought from the inner cave yet burned on the floor, and illuminated the rock-bound apartment. Fred's followers turned their eyes in wonder from point to point. Here was indeed a discovery.

But it was an old song to Fred, who hastened to the door of the late prison. It was unlocked, and he flung it hastily open. There was nothing within. Minnie had not been brought back.

"It was from there I rescued her, judge. See. Do you recognize that ribbon?"

He held up a flowered blue ribbon. It was eagerly seized by the excited father.

"It was hers!" he cried. "It was my Minnie's! Oh! where is she? What have you done with her?"

"We have not ended our search," answered Fred. "There is more of the cave to be explored. Come with me."

He took up the lamp and led the way to the inner cavern. To their surprise they were met by glaring eyes and sturdy forms. Two men stood before them like deer at bay. They were a brace of the fugitive outlaws, who had made their way back to the cave.

"Some more game!" cried Jerry. "I know them. Give yourselves up, my men, or it will go hard with you."

He advanced with presented rifle. But the men made no resistance. They were utterly demoralized by this invasion of their stronghold, and by the face of the constable, whose prowess they well knew.

While Jerry was securing them Fred made the round of the cave, followed closely by the judge. But no trace of any further hiding-place appeared. There were only bare, rugged walls. The stream gushed from the rear of the cave, through an impassable cleft in the rock. Evidently the cave ended here.

"I was mistaken, judge. She has not returned. She is somewhere outside on the mountain."

The look of suspicion deepened in the judge's eyes. He turned to the two prisoners.

"Do you know this boy? Is he not one of your gang?"

"You bet he is," answered one of the outlaws, with an evil look in his eyes. "He's the one as broke inter that pervision store t'other night. We hadn't nothin' whatever to do with it, jedge."

"And where is the young lady prisoner you had here?"

"Oh! Abe tuk her away yisterday. This ain't our only hidin'-place."

"I thought so. You have lied to me, boy. You will make nothing by it. Come, Jerry, bring your prisoners. We will make some of them lead us to the prison of my daughter."

He turned with a frowning and bitter expression toward the cave entrance.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MOUNTAIN TRIBUNAL.

WITHIN a natural amphitheater of the mountains sat a group of men. Judge Allen, Jerry with his prisoners, Elick Branson and several others of the party of search. They were seated on the stones with which the ground was thickly strewn, the captives in their midst. Fred had cast himself angrily down, with a defiant look on his face. The judge had been examining the youthful prisoner in a manner that roused the boy's anger.

"That is all," he declared. "I have told my story. If you do not believe it, do your worst. You will be sorry yet."

"Your story is a little too romantic," answered the judge, with a curling lip. "All this about your being a newspaper reporter is very pretty, but it doesn't agree with your close acquaintance with the robbers and your intimate knowledge of their haunts. I prefer to believe these men."

"He's one of us, judge; you kin take that fur sart'in," declared Fred's accuser.

"So I do; and I will not quickly forgive his base story about my daughter's rescue."

"That's all confounded taffy!" broke in Elick angrily. "If the boy says he tuk the gal out he did. That ther's no two ways about!"

"Hold your tongue, Elick!" cried the judge; "I intend to settle this affair, and don't want your advice. See here, men, I will make it well worth your while if you will lead the way to that other hiding-place, and aid me to rescue my daughter. I have influence to set you free, and will reward you richly!"

"Can't do it," was the sneering answer. "You haven't got cash enough to buy us to turn traitors to Abe Blizzard."

"Then you, boy. Put me on the track, and I will forgive you all."

"You are at liberty to do what you please, Judge Allen."

"By heavens, then you shall fill Abe Blizzard's cell till he is ready to occupy it himself!" cried the enraged judge. "You defy me, do you? He is your prisoner, Jerry. I will give you the warrant to-night. He shall be hostage for Abe Blizzard and for my daughter."

Jerry was advancing to the youthful prisoner, a look of mocking triumph in his eyes, his hands holding a pair of steel handcuffs, when he was suddenly checked by a loud voice from the rocks to the left.

"Hold yer hosses there. Nobody shall be hostage for old Abe. The lad saved my life, and I ain't the hog to let him go to prison in my place."

Every one started to his feet at this loud voice, and turned to face the harsh-featured, strong-limbed man who advanced from the sheltering rock.

"It's me," he said. "Abe Blizzard. I reckon some of ye've seen me afore. I fling up the

sponge, judge. I'm ready to sarve the balance o' my sentence. Been listenin' to yer little confab, and I'd bu'st my cocoanut afore that boy should go to prison fur me."

Fred was on his feet with the others.

"Thank you, Abe," he said, gratefully. "I refused to take your hand once. I will do so now, convict or not." He firmly grasped the outlaw's extended hand. "But you need not have feared for me. My imprisonment was likely to be but a short one."

"Elick, there is your game," returned the judge, sternly. "You take charge of Abe Blizzard. As for you, boy, don't be too sure. I said you should be hostage also for my daughter. By Heaven, if she is not forthcoming it shall go hard with you!"

"The gal's safe enough, now you bet on that, judge," cried Abe, earnestly. "What these two chaps has been tellin' is all stuff, jist to worry you. She's out, and the boy got her out. It wouldn't been healty fur him if I'd cotched him at the time. But bein' he's saved my life, I forgive him all the rest."

"Oh! is it so? Can it be so?" The judge's heart was in his words, as he broke out in feeling accents. "My daughter! My dear daughter! Has she fallen over some precipice? Why did you leave her to wander alone over the mountain? Where is she? Oh, where is my dear, lost daughter?"

"Here, father!"

The voice came from the same clump of rocks from which Abe had just before emerged. Out of this wild place came flying a girl's light form, her hair free, her eyes beaming with joy.

"Here, father. It is I, your Minnie!"

She sprung into his arms, and clasped him in a warm embrace.

"Minnie! My Minnie!" He folded her to his breast, and bowed his face above her, while tears of joy stood in his eyes. "My daughter! My own daughter! How came you here? Where have you been wandering?"

"I was rescued from the robbers' den by— Oh, where is he? They pursued him! Have they killed him?"

She flung the blinding hair from her eyes, and looked eagerly around. Her eyes rested on Fred, who stood gazing with intense emotion on her speaking face. In a moment she had sprung forward and flung her arms impulsively around him.

"It is he! It is he! Alive! Safe! Oh! I would never have forgiven myself if any harm had come to him!"

This impulse lasted but for a moment. She released the happy-faced youth, and returned with a blushing countenance to her father, hiding her face on his breast.

"I could not help it," she murmured. "He took me out of that dreadful den. He left me in the ravine, and lured off the robbers. I have been wandering about the mountains ever since. I heard your voices, and crept up to see if it might be friends. And you may know how glad I was when I heard my own father's voice."

"Do you want me any longer, judge?" asked Fred calmly. "I am hostage for your daughter, you know."

The judge looked at him with an odd expression.

"It seems to me, young man, that you have been making your way rapidly. But I owe you an apology. I have misjudged you, I perceive. But the circumstances were such—"

"They didn't fool me, judge," broke in Elick. "I knew the boy was true grit, from the start."

"Nor me," said Minnie, frankly extending her hand to Fred. "I believed in him and liked him at first sight."

"I think you owe me something more than an apology, Judge Allen," answered Fred, a little bitterly, though his tone softened as he felt the warm pressure of Minnie's hand. "You have treated me very harshly. I don't think that I look so much like a thief or an outlaw, that you should insist so strongly on my being one."

"Come, come, young man," answered the judge, in some confusion. "When you have been on the judge's bench as long as I have you will learn to not put much trust in people's faces. I am ruled by circumstances, and you must acknowledge the circumstances looked black for you. I have sent men to prison on less evidence, more than once. But I see that I have wronged you, and am ready to make amends. What shall I do to repay my injustice?"

"Not now, judge. I'll tell you some other time. I want time to think over what reward I will ask."

The judge looked into the shining eyes of the youth, and at the reddened cheek of the daughter, and an odd thought came into his mind. He turned brusquely to the men, not wishing them to notice the tall-tale evidence he had perceived.

"Come, gentlemen," he said in a commanding tone. "Our work seems to be done. We have all the outlaws. We have their prisoner. There is nothing more to keep us here. Let us descend."

Down the mountain they went, and to the distant town, Fred acting as Minnie's escort, and taking great pleasure in assisting her over rough places in the rocks and down steep declivities. The rogue managed to press her hands, and to get his arms around her waist, rather more than necessary, and not quite to the satisfaction of the judge, who said nothing, however.

That night the recaptured outlaws slept in their old cells in Oxford jail. Fred, at the judge's invitation, moved his quarters from the town to his residence, where a warm welcome was given him.

"You must excuse me, judge, and you too, ladies," said Fred, an hour after supper. "All this is very pleasant, but I have some writing to do, and duty before pleasure, you know."

"Oh, never mind the writing. That will keep."

"Excuse me," answered Fred, positively. "You are all very kind and agreeable. But as I've told you, judge, I have the honor of a newspaper on my shoulders. I am reporter for the *Morning Star*. Do you suppose I'm going to let the other papers get ahead of the *Star*, with a prime bit of news like this? Not much."

It's got to be telegraphed down before an hour, all about the capture of the outlaws. I'd sell my coat if any paper got ahead of the *Star* on this item."

"Mercy, you are not going to tell all about my adventure?" exclaimed Minnie in a flutter of excitement. "All about the escape, and the walk through the water, and—" She stopped and blushed, as she fancied that he might telegraph how closely he had twined his arm around her waist.

"Oh, no! All that must keep for my letter to-morrow. I can only send the bare story of the capture down by telegraph. But you may be sure I will not miss getting in the balance of our pleasant little adventure."

"No, no. You must not. I will never forgive you if you put my name in the paper."

Fred smiled and turned away to his task.

"I may get it in the paper yet, in some fashion," he roguishly said, over his shoulder. "But not until it is altogether agreeable to you. I will ask your permission first. If you say yes, in it goes."

A blush came over her pretty face. It struck her that there was more meaning in Fred's remark than appeared on the surface. She was cute enough to fancy that the handsome youth was deep in love with her.

It was two days before Fred took his departure on his return to the city. He had taken the opportunity in the mean time to get on the right side of the judge, and his wife, each of whom took a strong fancy to the frank and handsome young reporter. As for Minnie there was the sparkle of a tear in her eye as she bade him good-by.

"And you'll be sure and come again?"

"Some time,"

His look said that it might be soon.

"Good-by, lad," cried old Elick, clasping his hand warmly on meeting him at the station. "Hang me if I don't hate to see you goin'. Come up next season and I'll giv you some fun. There's prime gunnin' and fishin' on the mountings and there's no better guide in these diggin's than Elick Branson."

"Thank you, Elick. I won't forget."

And he didn't forget. Several years have passed since then. Fred is a well grown and very handsome young man, with a lucrative position on the *Star*. Minnie is a well grown and beautiful belle, with a frown for the beaux of Oxford, and a smile for the junior editor of the *Star*.

And the judge loves Fred as if he was already his son, and will hardly say nay when Fred asks for the hand of his daughter. And all the signs look as if it would not be long before Fred gets her name in the paper, in a marriage notice in which his own name is also likely to appear.

As for the rest of our characters, Elick Branson has had his wish in many a hunt with Fred Flyer. The outlaws have partly served out their terms, and are partly still in prison. Abe Blizzard is free for one, and has settled down to an honest life, in his old business of hunter and mountain guide. And so we leave them all to the life before them, with the wish that it may be a long and happy one.

THE END.

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